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JULY

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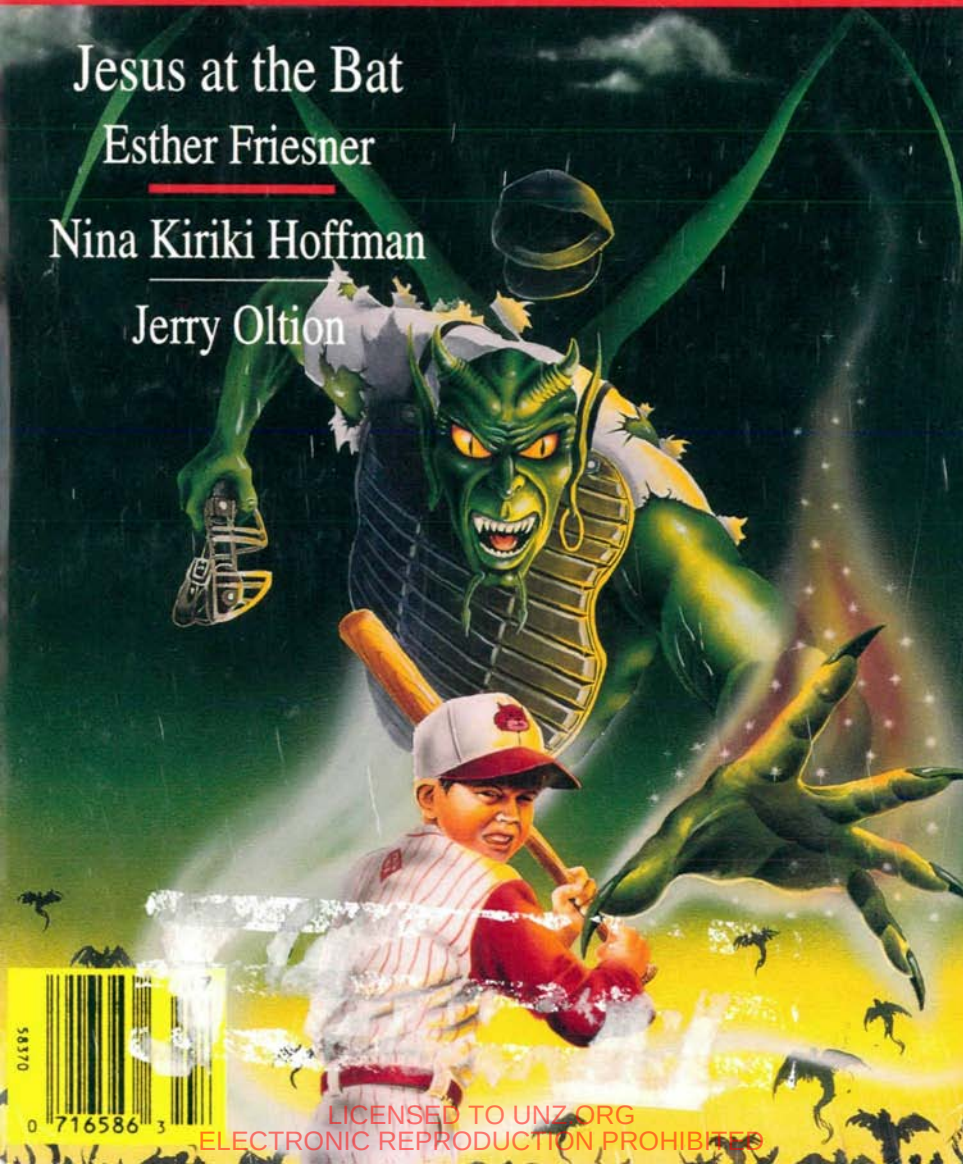

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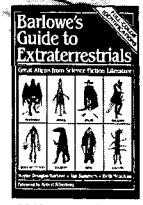

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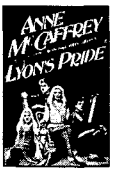

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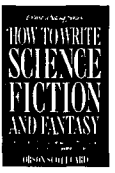

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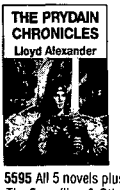

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction

JULY • 45th Year of Publication

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EDWARD L. FERMAN, Publisher — KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH, Editor
CHERYL CASS, Circulation Manager — AUDREY FERMAN, Assistant Publisher
BOB HOWE, ROBIN O'CONNOR, Assistant Editors — HARLAN ELLISON, Film Editor

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GENERAL OFFICE: 143 CREAM HILL RD., WEST CORNWALL, CT 06796
EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 11526, EUGENE, OR 97440

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I KEEP LOOKing for the hidden camera. Someday Allen Funt will jump out of the shadows and shout, "Candid Camera!" The rest of us will grin, reassuring ourselves that we knew it was a hoax after all.

It has to be. I mean, how can anyone say these things with a straight face? Did you know that we no longer exercise? We now participate in physical activity. The word "exercise" is pejorative, according to the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. "Physical activity" makes us feel better about...well, exercising.

And at the time of this writing, in California, the Board of Education has decided to ban an Alice Walker story from a 1994 state-wide English test. The story, "Am I Blue," is "anti-meat eating." These are the same folks who pulled an excerpt from "An American Childhood" by Annie Dillard because a description of a snowball fight was too violent.

The test is given to 10th graders to assess their writing and reading comprehension skills. Marion McDowell, president of the Board, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the Walker story "could be rather disturbing to some students who would then be expected to write a good essay while they were upset."

Huh? Excuse me? Many people write good essays when they are upset. It gives them something to write about.

But Ms. McDowell's attitude upsets me for a more basic reason. Good fiction draws an emotional response from the reader. Devaluing a story because it upsets someone—in any circumstance—devalues literature.

Literature must run the gamut of human emotion from whimsy to terror. Cool intellectual thought should be represented alongside raw animal emotion. I have this fear that we will soon be reading only what I have termed "happy fic"—bland, emotionless fiction about superficial events—because happy fic upsets no one. And in this country, we suddenly

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have a phobia of upsetting anyone.

When I put an issue of this magazine together, I try to pick stories that will run through as many human emotions as possible. I try to balance humor with horror, upbeat science fiction with downbeat fantasy (or vice versa). I figure an issue is a success if it makes one person understand a new viewpoint or feel an emotion rarely felt. Sometimes I fail — an issue will be one-note (such as the issue I thought was light until someone pointed out that every story (even the funny one) was about death) — and sometimes I succeed. The successful issues get the most letters. For each angry letter, we receive one letter of praise.

But we aren't careless. I believe that each word, each event, each character in a short story should be essential to that short story. Writers have revised material as many as four and five times before the work has seen print. We strive for the best fiction we can publish — fiction that should make us laugh, cry, and think.

Some of the stories we publish disturb me. Sometimes I finish reading a manuscript and find that I am done reading for the evening because the experience in the story was so powerful that I cannot go to something different. I must think about the story or let the emotions it aroused in me fade before I move on. And contrary to what Ms. McDowell thinks, such a reaction is good. If I were required to write an essay at that point, the essay would be top-notch *because I had an emotional response*, not in spite of it.

We are so afraid of upsetting other people that we are afraid to think. We are afraid to express opinions. We are afraid to be ourselves. I don't expect anyone but me to like every story in this magazine. But I do hope that our subscribers, and science fiction and fantasy readers in general, approach literature with an open mind. We are, after all, the literature of the future, the literature of change. If we can't accept stories that present a plethora of viewpoints, then how can we accept our funny-looking neighbors down the street? How can we march with confidence into the next century if we are afraid of every word we speak?

I am still searching for Allen Funt. I still want this fear and political correctness to be a joke. Because if it isn't, then I can no longer exercise at the local rec center. I can't publish powerful stories because they might upset someone.

Is that something glinting in the corner? Please excuse me while I go investigate. I am hoping to find a hidden camera.

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Esther M. Friesner is a frequent contributor to F&SF, *yet "Jesus at the Bat" marks her first cover story. With it, she helped us here at the magazine remember our fondness for baseball, baseball stories, and the boys of summer. The story was inspired by her own experiences as a Little League parent.*

"I'm tempted to begin this with 'It looked extremely rocky for the Nazareth Nine that day...'" she writes, "but that wouldn't be accurate. Let it be known to everyone who ever wondered whether we here in suburbia take our Little League that seriously, the answer is no. We take it religiously. I am not currently planning to move, but will keep you posted after this tale hits print. Play ball!"

Jesus at the Bat

By Esther M. Friesner

PHILIP ROTH HAD ALREADY written *The Great American Novel;* Victor Harris was screwed. If you're going to be successful with the writing thing you have to write about what you know, and the only thing Victor Harris really knew was baseball. (He thought he knew sex, but that's another story.) The only question remaining was: How much longer would he be able to keep up the sweet, unstressful position of sensitive, creative, Aspiring-Author/Househusband (without actually becoming *Published* Author/Househusband) before Barb, his wife, caught wise?

He kept a copy of Stephen King's *Playboy* interview prominently displayed in the small basement cubby that was his "office," the better to remind Barb of at least one loyal lady who'd held down a decidedly unfun job (Dunkin' Donuts) while hubby mud-wrestled with the Muse until he hit pay dirt. *Stand by your man,* it seemed to say, *and soon you shall limo beside him. Cast your sugar crullers upon the waters and they shall be returned unto you an hundredfold as caviar.* But the interview was curling with age

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faster than Victor's first rejection slip (also prominently displayed: it was from the *New Yorker* and had the distinction of sporting an actual, human, hand-written note of comment scrawled in the margin, *viz.*: "Sorry." Whether this referred to the rejecting editor's regrets or the manuscript's quality was best left nebulous) and Barb was starting to get the hard-bitten, narrow look of a ten-year-old facing off against parents who persist in chirping about Santa. Not good.

So the King interview was a life-vest whose kapok molecules were rapidly metamorphosing into cesium. Victor told himself that many a good woman of Barb's generation would be grateful to have a fulfilling multiphase career as aesthetician by day, Amway rep by night, but Barb didn't see it that way. Why didn't she appreciate the stresses of the Art? Why must he cringe each time she demanded, "Haven't you sold anything *yet*?" or "Why don't you go down to Four Corners Used Cars and see if Jerry'll give you your old job back?" or "Why in hell did you ever major in *English*? Everyone around here speaks it already."

Useless to attempt explaining the creative nature to such a scrawny soul. Futile to preach the exquisitely painful yet glacial process of inspiration, motivation, and execution in *l'oeuvre* Harris to the heathen. None so blind as they who will not see themselves vacationing in Hawaii this year — *again!* — and the Millers next door have already gone *four times!*

Of the bricks of such marital differences are the divorce courts of this fair nation built. So, too, the occasional ax-murder-with-P.M.S.-defense case. On the surface it would seem that a miracle would be necessary to save Victor Harris' neck from the chop. That was where the Brothers' Meeting Little League came in.

No, really.

And that was why, with luck, there would forever be one less used car salesman at Four Corners and never a moment's peace for the Harris family at the Sharon Valley Regional Elementary School P.T.A. spring picnic.

"Barb, hon, you look just gorgeous!" Sally McClellan swept down on Barb like a tornado on a trailer park.

The McClellans and the Harrises didn't usually move in the same circles. Victor Harris moved in circles pretty constantly, while Phil McClellan moved solely in a steep, straight line of ascent to the wind-swept heights of financial success whence he might safely piss on the

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upturned faces of those below.

However, when the first sweet shoots of spring green burst through the hard Sharon Valley earth, Phil McClellan graciously maintained temporary bladder control so far as Victor's face went. As he told The Little Woman, if kissing Victor Harris' skinny ass was called for to achieve your goals, then by God and Ted Turner Industries, Phil McClellan would take a back seat to no one when it came to posterior pucker-ups. The Little Woman conducted herself accordingly as regarded *Mrs.* Victor Harris' more shapely buns, indeed.

Barb was nobody's fool except Victor's and he'd had to marry her for that privilege. She knew just what Sally was after and she sat back on the picnic table bench with all the smirking superiority of a Renaissance prince contemplating where to insert his next dagger. "Sally, darling," she purred. Cheeks brushed. Kissy-kissy mwah-mwahs were uttered. "When are you gonna come around to the *La Belle* so I can get my hands on your hair?" (*La Belle* being the town aesthetorium where Barb currently aestheted.)

Sally gave a nervous little giggle and fluffed her golden pouf of curls with no apparent need. "Oh, I'll be around. I don't think I'm due for a trim just yet."

"Every six weeks." Relentless, that was Barb in the spring. "And I know I haven't seen you since last September." Somewhere a ghostly poniard glittered. "I hear tell you've been going up to Pittsburgh to have it done." *Zzzip-zot*, a slender blade slipped in and out between Sally McClellan's spareribs without The Little Woman feeling anything but a draft tickling her pancreas.

Sally turned bright red. "Who told you that?"

"Marylynn Drummer." Barb's eyes were hooded and inscrutable, but she licked her lips to savor the taste of blood.

"Well, it's just a baldfaced *lie*!" Sally spat. "When did she say so?"

"Mmmm, hard to recall." Barb sucked a few last crimson drops off the tip of her index finger. "I see her so often. Every week she's in the *La Belle* for a shampoo and blow-dry at least. She's got a standing appointment." It was time for the *coup de grâce*, the mercy stroke to end the victim's misery but good. "Sometimes she even brings in little Bobby, and you would be amazed to see how that boy has grown. Why, just the other day Vic was saying to me, 'Barb, I'd like to see what Bobby Drummer could do if I gave him a chance to pitch, I really would.'"

It was all over except for where to ship the body.

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Sally McClellan's face sank in on itself like an old helium balloon with a pinhole leak. "Isn't that interesting," she said through a smile so stiff it clattered. "But do you think it's wise? My Jason has always pitched for the Bobcats, and I assumed — "

Barb laughed. "It's not like Vic was breaking up a *winning* team set-up, sweetie. Who knows? If Vic gives Bobby a chance to pitch, maybe that'll turn the trick. And you should have seen Bobby's little face light up when I told him what Coach Vic was considering."

"Considering? Then it's not settled?" Sally's eyes flashed. She fingered her hair. "You know, it's so easy to let yourself go over the winter, don't you agree, Barb? Maybe I should take a lesson off Marylynn Drummer. You got room for another standing appointment on your calendar?"

"I'll see what I can do," Barb murmured. "Of course it is harder to fit things in these days. Did I tell you that Pauline Fleck's having me host an Amway party at her family reunion?" Needless to say, Barb went on to rhapsodize over how much dear little Scott Fleck had grown this past winter and didn't Sally agree that the boy deserved a tryout as pitcher for the Bobcats, too?

That night, Victor didn't have to listen to Barb's barbs about where he was on the stairway to success and where he ought to be. Happily swamped with pleas for *La Belle* and Amway appointments (high tips and high sales guaranteed, you betcha), Barb had better things to do with her tongue than rag on the man whose chronic underemployment made his Little League coaching job possible. Yes, baseball season was upon them once more, and so long as Victor owned the power to say whose son played (and whether the boy's field position were somewhere in this time-zone), domestic bliss and Barb's own auburn-turfed diamond were his all his.

Nor did it matter a lick that the Brothers' Meeting Bobcats were a team so slack and poorly that a reputable publisher of dictionaries had asked them to pose as the illustration for *pathetic.*

No, it didn't matter to Coach Vic at all, but it mattered very much to Vic Junior.

Vic Junior loved baseball. He was one of those pure souls born with a vision of The Game untainted by the dross and illusion of this sorry world. To him, baseball spoke of Buddha-nature, not Lite Beer. (The *Tao* which can be named is not the *Tao*, but the *Tao* which has its batting stats printed on

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the back of a trading card is way awesome.) The smell of a newly oiled glove, the clean crack of bat hitting ball, the sight of so many strong, young lads tearing around the bases in those tight-fitting pants, all moved him in ways he could not yet hang a name on. It was a source of spiritual pain to him that his team so seldom won.

It was a pain less spiritual every time Jase McClellan knocked him down in the school yard and taunted him with the fact that he wouldn't be on the Bobcats team at all if not for the fact that his old man was the coach.

Vic Junior could have tattled on Jase, but he was what adults called a *good* child. In other words, there were sponges adorning the ocean floor who had more backbone than he. He went to church without a fuss and even listened to what his Sunday school teacher had to relate of Hell. He tithed his allowance not because his mother made him but in the sure and certain hope that he was making time payments on one colossal, outsize, super-mega-omniprayer of his own asking being answered some day. He wasn't sure what he was going to request when he finally submitted his sealed bid to Glory, but he knew it would be something *much* better than just asking God to burn Jase McClellan in the fiery pit until his eyeballs melted and his hair frizzled away and the skin on his face blackened and cracked and flaked from the charring bones and his dick fell off.

And then, one day, something happened. Who knows how these things get started? So much depends on serendipity. Pharaoh's daughter might have kept on walking when she heard that wailing in the bulrushes. "Just one of the sacred cats being devoured by one of the sacred crocodiles," she'd say with a shrug of her sweet brown shoulders, and Charlton Heston's resumé would have been several pages shorter.

What serendipped in this case was Vic Junior came into *La Belle* to see his Mom and by some karmic radar happened to find the one copy of *Sports Illustrated* in the whole establishment. Like a crow among the lilies it reposed in dog-eared splendor amidst the issues of *Woman's Day* and *Mademoiselle* and *Good Housekeeping*. Last desperate refuge of the male compelled for whatever unholy cause to accompany his woman into the lair of glamor, its well-thumbed antique pages gave moving testimony that a man will submerge himself in last year's sports "news" sooner than he will open a copy of *Cosmopolitan* to willingly read "Impotence: Things Are Looking Up."

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"Mom!" Vic Junior cried, bursting in on his hardworking parent, waving the tattered magazine. "Mom, did you *see* this?"

Barb was giving Edna Newburgh a streak job. Mom couldn't see much of anything for all the ammonia fumes peeling her eyeballs raw. "Don't bother Mommy now, sweetheart," she said testily.

"But Mom, *look*! There's an article in here about how the American Little League champions got to go to Japan!" Vic Junior was insistent. Despite the noxious atmosphere he jiggled closer to Edna Newburgh's reeking head and thrust the magazine under his mother's nose.

"So what's that to you? *Champions* means *winners*. I said *not now!*" Barb snapped, flipping the open copy out of Vic Junior's hands with one jab of her elbow. (That she could do this at all was mute testimony to the worthiness of Vic Junior's team nickname, "Wimpgrip Harris.") Like some monstrous mutant butterfly, the magazine took wing and fluttered to the hair-strewn floor.

Giving his mother a cold you'll-be-sorry-when-I-grow-up-to-be-a-cross-dresser eye, Vic Junior gathered up his treasure, brushed clots of brown, black, blonde, and red tresses from the slick pages, and retreated to his chair in the waiting area.

He didn't need her to tell him what *champions* meant. It was a fishbone of resentment lodged deep in his throat, proof against all psychological Heimlich maneuvers, that the Bobcats were the losingest team in the history of Little League, baseball, and American sport. The only time a group of kids ended up with that much public egg on their faces was during the Children's Crusade when hundreds of starry-eyed juvenile pilgrims to the Holy Land ended up in the slave pens of the East instead. But even some of those guys could hit better than the Bobcats.

For Vic Junior it was his mother's scorn that hurt more than losing *per se*. A man might rail against the sun's rising in the east as easily as against the Bobcats once again playing the part of the walked-on in the league's latest walk-over — such were the dull-eyed Facts of Life — but she didn't have to be so *mean* about it! Of course *she* wouldn't see it that way; *she'd* say she was only being realistic.

In his subconscious, Vic Junior understood as follows: *A man ought to be entitled to hold onto his dreams without some female always yawping at him about reality. Somewhere in the Constitution it should say that any*

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woman apprehended in the act of trying to yank us back down to earth by the seat of our pants will be stood on her head in a pit of hog entrails and left for the buzzards, just to see how she likes that *for reality!*

But a little above the subconscious, in his heart-of-hearts, all that Vic Junior said into the listening dark was: *Please, God, give us the way to win!*

It was a child's simple prayer: sincere, unadorned, pure as a baby dewdrop. On the cosmic scale of values it had clout, pizzazz, and buying power.

It worked.

EXCUSE ME, sir, but is this where the Little League tryouts are?"

Victor Harris looked down at the brat presumptuous enough to tug at his clipboard-toting arm. "Who are you?" he snapped. His mirrorshades filtered through the picture of a skinny twelve-year-old kid like many others on the team: dark hair, dark eyes, all arms and legs, a little more sunbrowned than most of the specimens currently blundering through warm-ups on the outfield. "Did you sign up at school?"

"No, sir," the kid replied, too respectful to be true. "I just got here." He tapped the brim of his cap so Victor could see the *Angels* logo.

Fine, good, *no problemo*, that explained it. Brothers' Meeting wasn't exactly your hub of suburban commerce, but it was close to Pittsburgh. You did get the occasional corporate family popping in from points unknown to settle down amongst the simple natives to swap beads 'n' trinkets until Daddy's company shipped the poor bastard somewhere else.

"L.A., huh? Nice tan. Okay, kid, what's your name?"

"Yeshua ben Jose."

Was that an accent? Accents made Victor nervous. So did names that sounded like they ought to be stuffed in a pita pocket instead of spread on Wonder Bread.

"Yeshu — what?"

"Yeshua ben Jose, sir." The kid pounded a fist into his glove. "Can I play?"

Victor thumbed back the brim of his cap. "You're not from L.A., are you, son?"

"No, sir." The boy didn't volunteer anything more. In another kid, you

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could put it down to obnoxiousness, but this one's face was empty of anything except a clear-burning eagerness to please. It wasn't natural and it made Victor's teeth curl.

"You wanna tell me where you *are* from?"

"Israel."

A big fat wrinkled *Uh-oh* tickertaped across Victor's face and stayed there until he heard the kid go on to say: "Last thing, I was in Jerusalem, but I was born in Bethlehem and — "

"Bethlehem?" It was like saying *Paris* to someone from Kentucky. Notre Dame and *la Tour Eiffel* just didn't show up in the equation. "Oh, hey, fine, that's all right, then. My mother's people came from Bethlehem," Victor said. He clapped the boy on the shoulder. "So your father work in the steel mills before or what?"

For the first time, the boy looked doubtful. "My father works just about everywhere."

"No fooling. It's a pain, isn't it?" Victor was starting to feel sorry for the kid. Hard enough row to hoe, coming all the way from Israel where things kept going *kaboom!* Harder when your old man couldn't hold down a job and had to keep switching positions and places to live and even countries just to earn a living. At least the kid had been born in this country, but still, just wait until the other Bobcats found out he was Jewish! (Brother's Meeting wasn't exactly world famous for its cosmopolitan attitude in matters of religion. Old Mrs. Russell, a devout Presbyterian, had disinherited her daughter for entering into a mixed marriage with a Lutheran.)

Maybe the kindest thing to do would be to send him out onto the field for the tryouts and let him fall on his face. That shouldn't take too long. Everyone knew for a fact — including Victor Harris, who had once owned a Sandy Koufax card — that Jews played even worse baseball than Bobcats.

Of course the kid was dynamite. Prayers for smiting your enemies don't get answered with your enemies just catching mild colds and missing a couple of days' work, oh no! It's the plague or nothing. The same and more goes for a child's prayer that the hand of the Omnipotent yank his Little League team out of the cellar. Yes sir, one look at how little Yeshua ben Jose (simpler to call him "Bennie" and be done with it) hit, pitched, fielded, and ran, and Coach Vic was left slack-jawed, poleaxed, and passionately in love at home plate.

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"Porter Rickin'," he declared later that night while Barb cleared the dinner dishes. "That's got to be the only explanation."

"What has?" Barb asked, not really giving a damn.

"That new kid, Bennie. I mean, with a last name like *Jose*? I know he doesn't pronounce it Spanish, but still — I mean, there is no other way to account for how good he is and he's still Jewish. His folks might come from Israel, but somewhere back along the line they must've had a Porter Rickin' in the kibbutz woodpile. Or a Mexican at least. Now *they* can play ball!"

"Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh," said Barb which was her little way of playing ball with her husband without having to endure the drag of actually listening to what he had to say.

"He's pretty good, isn't he, Dad?" Vic Junior asked brightly, proud of himself.

"Good? Why he's a fuckin' mira — !"

"*Vic*tor!" Barb's warning tone got drowned out by the shrilling of the telephone. Coach Vic was still going on about how he was going to play Bennie to best advantage when she went to answer it.

She returned a grimmer woman.

"*That* was Sally McClellan," she said, in the same way a medieval peasant might have returned from a visit to the local witch to announce *The* good *news is I've got the Black Death.* "She says you're not letting her Jason pitch this year."

"You bet your sweet ass, I'm not!" Victor beamed. "With someone like Bennie who can actually get the ball over the center of the plate ten out of ten, I should put in 'Twelve Thumbs' McClellan? What am I, crazy?"

"What you are," Barb said, "is stupid."

"Look, Barb, I know baseball, and I've been coaching this team for five years, ever since Vic Junior was in Pee Wees and didn't know which end of the bat to hold. And five years is exactly how long it's been since I saw a *glimmer* of hope for the Bobcats winning even one damn game. I'm telling you, Bennie is *it*!"

"Is Bennie's mother going to take over the weekly appointment Sally McClellan just cancelled, and pay up all the ass-kissing big tips that went with it?" Barb shot back. "Is she going to buy all the Amway products that Sally McClellan just *happened* to discover were defective and wants to return for a refund? And if she'll do that, will she do the same when all the other

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mothers come after us with chainsaws because you dumped Jason as pitcher and didn't replace him with one of *their* brats? Oh no! *You* had to pick a newcomer, a foreigner, a *Jew!*" She stomped out of the house. The two Victors could hear her car tires gouging canyons in the gravel driveway as she roared off.

Barb's outburst was so shocking that it left her husband staring off agape into space. "Do *you* think I did the wrong thing, son?" Victor asked his boy. Normally he never asked Victor Junior anything except *Where did your mother hide the butter?* but these were special circumstances.

"I've got faith in you, Dad." Victor Junior reached across the table to pat his father's arm and got his elbow in the leftover mashed potatoes.

Faith can move mountains even if it's no good at getting mashed potatoes out of the way. In the next few days, Coach Vic had his faith sorely tested in the raging fires of angry mothers. At every practice, he found another of the ladies lurking for him, wearing flinty eyes and a deadly *ninja* combat brassiere that turned perfectly good ornamental boobs into twin symbols of outthrusting, nuclear warhead-tipped aggression.

The questions they inevitably shot at him were always the same:

"Who *is* that kid?"

"Why are you letting *him* pitch and not my [insert child's name here]?"

"Is something funny going on?"

"What, did his mother sleep with you or something?"

"Why didn't you tell *me* that was the way to do it?"

Coach Vic just as inevitably replied, "Bennie, because he's good, no, no," and "Well, it's too late for that to change anything *this* year because I've got the roster all set up but I bet by *next* season Bennie's folks will have moved somewhere else so see me then, honey."

Then the Bobcats met their first opponents of the season and it was a whole new ball game.

"We won."

It was uttered as a whisper, softer than a butterfly's tap-dance routine, on a dozen lips at once. No one dared to say it out loud, at first, for fear that they would wake up and discover it had all been just a Frank Capra movie.

Still, there were the Bobcats, for once getting to *give* the Good Sportsmanship cheer to the losing team. It was a simple "Two-four-six-eight, who

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do we appreciate?" holler, but there was a slight delay while Coach Vic taught his boys the never-used words they'd long since forgotten.

"We won."

Mothers turned to fathers, eyes meeting eyes in a climax of mutual awe and wonder better than what most of them had been having in the bedroom. Hands clasped hands, bosoms swelled, manly chests inflated, pulses raced. (There were more than a few damp spots left behind on the bleachers, but delicacy prevents any closer investigation into how they got there.)

"We fuck-u-lutely *won*!" Coach Vic shouted in the confines of his home, and got a dirty look from Barb that quickly melted when she recalled the ecstatic smiles of the other mothers. For once they had seen their man-children taste the thrill of victory, and lo, it was savory to the max. Their maternal fibers exuded endorphins like crazy. They were *happy*. A happy mom is a beauty-shop-going, Amway-buying mom.

"You fuck-u-lutely said it!" Barb shouted back and threw her arms around her hubby's sweaty neck.

Well, there it was: They won. And there it was again the next week, and the next. Bennie's skills on the mound left other teams looking at a steady dict of three-up-three-down while his batting *savoir faire* was —

Hmmm. Honesty's best when speaking of matters pertaining to the divine or the IRS. Bennie could hit, but Bennie was only one skinny little kid. He got a homer every time he was up, then Coach Vic had to plod his hitless way through the team roster until Bennie's number came up again before the Bobcats could get another run on the board. They won, but never by much. It was galling.

Still, since Bennie's pitching disposed of the other team one-two-three and the other team's pitcher could do the same for every Bobcat save Bennie, the local Little League enjoyed a season of the shortest games on record. Parents with limited attention spans and only one six-pack in the cooler were grateful.

Ward Gibbon was not grateful.

Ward Gibbon was the father of Jim Gibbon of the Breezy Lake Lions, and up until this Bennie-kid showed up, Jim Gibbon looked fair to cut a major Bennie-like swath through the local opposition, hauling the Lions along with him to the Championship in true and veritable Bennie-style.

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Now you've got to understand something about Ward Gibbon: He was a man embittered to the bone. It began when his loving parents named him after their favorite Golden Age television character. Naturally, once he hit school-age, he was dubbed Mental Ward by his juvenile cronies at Breezy Lake Elementary. (A few of the better educated children preferred to seize upon his last name as the means to make his life a living hell, following him around the school making hooting noises and pelting him with bananas.) Worse, creeping nostalgia for Golden Age TV struck his marriage a telling blow when the kittenish Mrs. Gibbon insisted on initiating intimacy by announcing coyly, "Ward, I'm worried about the beaver."

Ward bore his nominal cross grimly, but resolved that no son of his would suffer so. That was why he gave the boy a simple name: *Jim!* So crisp, so clean, so common! Let the infant rabble try to make mock of *that!*

Children love a challenge. Ward Gibbon heard with horror from his son how the other kids at school called him Jungle Jim and Jim Nastics and Jimbo-Bimbo. And there were still some kids around not wholly sunk in the Teenage Mutant Ninja Dorkocracy who knew what a gibbon was. Young Jim Gibbon came home with enough mashed banana in his hair to prove that.

Ward was not a man who gave up easily. If he could not save his son from the horrors of the nyah-nyah mob, he resolved to at least make him proof against all taunts. To this end, there was only one means: Excellence! And for this purpose, diamonds were also a boy's best friend.

Who mocked at Daryl Strawberry's juicy name? Who jeered and jiggled digits at Rollie Fingers? Who had ever been fool enough to make wiggling whisker-signs at Catfish Hunter? Once you climbed the mountain, few *hoi polloi* you left behind had the nerve to toss insults at you, nor the arm to fling bananas to that Olympian height. Let Jim Gibbon triumph on the Little League field, and none would dare sneer at him off. So Ward Gibbon commenced to push his son harder than Mrs. Gibbon ever did in all her nineteen-and-a-half hours of hard labor, and do you know what — ?

It worked. Isn't life strange? No operating manual accompanies the afterbirth, yet somehow, sometimes, natural-born humans do manage to stumble across one of the Answers To It All. For the Gibbons, *père et fils*, that Answer was baseball.

Or it was until they came up against Bennie.

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Ward Gibbon sat on the top rung of the bleachers, his Sans-a-Belt slacks pressed into permanent horizontal ridges across his butt by the hot aluminum slats. With his 'nuff said *I'm With Stupid* cap pulled low over his eyes and his beaky red nose thrusting out from beneath the visor, he glowered over the ballfield like an avenging, alcoholic owl. He was pissed.

Most loyal dads will become pissed to a greater or lesser degree when their son's team is losing, but this went beyond mere *pro forma* pissitude. His son's team — his *son*, goddamit! — was losing to the *Bobcats!* Losing scorelessly, what's more. It was like being told you'd come in second to Lizzie Borden for the title of Daddy's Girl.

Ward Gibbon's eyes narrowed. He wouldn't know a gimlet unless you poured it into a cocktail glass, yet for all that he now fixed a steely gimlet eye on the one spectacular, incredible, patently obvious cause of it all: Bennie. There was something about that kid...Ward's mouth screwed up into a hard, bitter nut of sullen wrath that boded no good if cracked.

The Breezy Lake Lions lost the game, and with it all chance to go on to the Regionals. Jim Gibbon flung down his glove and burst into tears. Ward Gibbon descended from the bleachers with hate in his heart and cold-blooded, premeditated research on his mind.

"*Disqualified*?" Victor Harris bellowed into the telephone. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

There was a pause while the party on the other end of the call explained. From the motel bed, Barb watched her man go whiter than a sheet washed in Amway detergent. He slammed down the receiver hard enough to score several Loony Tunes sight-gags by making the furniture jump.

"Honey, what's wrong?" she asked.

"Son of a walleyed *bitch*," he explained. This might have been enough for other wives, but Barb was a Virgo. She demanded details.

Vic strode to the window and gazed out at the inspiring panorama of Williamsport, PA, site of that cosmopolitan Holy Grail, the Little League playoff Finals. The Brothers' Meeting Bobcats had sheared through all intermediate opposition like a hot knife through a mugging victim. Somewhere out there was a Taiwanese team who were about to get their sorry asses kicked (in the spirit of international brotherhood and good sportsmanship). To this peak of glory had Bennie's prowess brought the team, and now — O

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ironic son of a walleyed bitch! — from this peak of glory was Bennie about to get them booted. Off. Of.

"You don't have any forms turned in for the kid?" Barb skirled. "All this time he's been with the team and you never got his papers in order?"

Vic did not like the way she was so lavishly using the second-person-singular. Voiced that way, the situation seemed to be all *his* fault. He was quick to pivot the spotlight of blame right back to where it truly belonged.

"Shit, those desk jockeys wouldn't've even noticed Bennie's papers weren't in order if not for some asshole troublemaker coming in, nosing around, and making them get off their butts to look up the kid's records. You think all I've got time for is *paperwork*? The boys need me on the field, not stuck behind some desk shuffling bureaucratic crap. You think they'd have come this far on *paperwork*?"

"No," Barb said. She was a reasonable woman. "But if I know my bureaucrapheads, I'll bet no paperwork on Bennie equals no Finals for the Bobcats. Also disqualifications on all the games that brought them here. Also one hell of a shit storm for my *La Belle* and Amway profits when the team parents find out." She reached for the telephone. "Hello, Information? Brothers' Meeting, please. I'd like the number of Four Corners Used Cars."

Vic burst out of the room, his jawline a white, tight wedge of bone knifing through taut scarlet skin. He rolled out of the motel and down the street like a stormcloud. His years as a writer had taught him that there was always a way out: an eraser, a bottle of Wite-out, a *delete* command, a hundred last-minute ways to drag the Cavalry over the hill to the rescue. He would lay his case before the Little League Powers That Be. He would cajole, he would reason, he would threaten, he would beg, he would cite patriotism and misrepresent the entire Brothers' Meeting Bobcats team as composed exclusively of spunky HIV-positive hemophiliac orphans if he had to, but one thing he would not do:

He would *not* go gentle into that Only-one-owner-creampuff good night.

The Taiwanese team was good, but as Vic Junior told Bennie, they were godless.

Bennie scratched his head and eyed the opposing dugout. "No, they're not."

"Yes, they are," Vic Junior maintained. "They don't believe in

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You, do they?"

"Well, maybe not specifically, but — "

"So that means they're godless, and *that* means they're all going to Hell, and that *really* means they can't win this ball game," he finished with satisfaction.

"Look, Vic, about Hell..."

"Yeah?" A keen, canny look came into Vic Junior's eye. Every since Bennie had showed up and made his true self known (It's only good manners to inform the petitioner when the Answer to his prayers blows into town), Vic Junior had peppered him with questions about the Afterlife. In particular, Vic Junior wanted to know what sort of gory, painful, humiliating eternal trials and punishments awaited bullies like Jase McClellan. Bennie remained closemouthed under direct inquiry, and even reprimanded Vic Junior quite sternly for prying too closely into matters Man Was Not Meant To Know (i.e. "Mind your own beeswax!"). But as long as Bennie himself had brought up the subject...

"Yeah, what *about* Hell?" Vic Junior demanded. Hey, the backdoor's better than no door!

Bennie sighed. "Never mind."

"Aw, *c'mon*!" Vic Junior whined. "I won't tell anyone. Is it really full of fire and brimstone and cool shit like that? Our Sunday school teacher told about how You went down into Hell to yank a whole bunch of guys out, so You oughta know. I mean, how hot *was* it?"

"Suffer the little children, suffer the little children, suffer the little children," Bennie muttered to himself, *mantra*-wise, eyes on the blue sky above. It was the perfect day for a ball game, cloudless yet cool and dry. He was jabbed out of his reverie by Vic Junior's bony elbow and nasal bleat:

"*Pleeeeeeeze*?"

Bennie gave Vic Junior a look that would have sent a whole passel of Temple moneychangers scurrying for cover. It was a scowl of righteous wrath fit to turn innocent bystanders into pillars of salt or fig trees or divorce lawyers. Just so had artists through the ages portrayed Him enthroned in glory on Doomsday, running sinful Mankind across the celestial price-scanner to separate the metaphysical Brie from the pasteurized American-style-flavored cheese-food product. He opened His mouth to speak and Vic Junior heard a distant rumble of thunder, saw tiny lightnings flash behind Bennie's retainer.

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"Aw, skip it," Vic Junior said. He knew when to quit. He was one of the Top Ten quitters of all time, but for once it was a good idea.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," said Bennie with a smile.

"Yeah," Vic Junior agreed. "Now let's kick butt."

The flags were raised, the anthems played, the cry of "Play ball!" rang out, and the teams streamed onto the field to the wild applause and cheers of the spectators. The Brothers' Meeting Bobcats' parents shouted encouragement to their youngsters and hardly any racial slurs worth mentioning at the Taiwanese team.

"Eat *sushi*, you heathen zipperheads!" Sally McClellan stood up and hollered.

"Sally, they're *not* Japanese!" Her husband Phil jerked her back down into her seat by the neck of her Brothers' Meeting Bobcats Booster jacket. "Now shut up. These assholes might have some stupid good-sportsmanship rule in effect. Do you want the boys to lose the game thanks to your big mouth?"

"No, dear," Sally replied meekly, then took advantage of the crowd's overwhelming roar to snarl, *sotto voce*, "Eat *me*, darling."

It was a game that would live forever in the annals of Little League and the casebooks of psychiatry. A play-by-play report would profit a man little who might strive to understand what happened that day on the grassy fields of Williamsport. Between Bennie and the Taiwanese pitcher it was a virtually scoreless game. The batting order prevented Vic Junior's visiting miracle from racking up more than one run every three innings, yet even so, it should have been sufficient.

It was not sufficient for some.

"Smite them, O Lord," Vic Junior said to Bennie in the dugout as they prepared to take their last turn at bat in the bottom of the seventh (this being Little League).

"Huh?" said Bennie.

"You know, *smite* them." Vic Junior gave his Savior a poke in the ribs. "Pour out Thy wrath. Drive them before Thee. Score us some more runs."

"We've got two runs and they don't have any. I'm up third. We'll have three runs and win the championship. What more do you want?"

"Winning it with *three* lousy runs? That's not a *man's* game" Vic Junior's sneer was much like his father's. "That's *pussy!*"

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Bennie's face darkened. "Having enough to win isn't enough for you, huh? You want more runs. You don't *need* 'em, but you want 'em anyway. Is that all you *really* want?" It was asked in a tone of voice that should have set off whole carillons of alarm bells in Vic Junior's subconscious. It was the big bad brother of his Sunday School teacher's voice when she oh-so-sweetly inquired, *Do you* really *want to read that comic book instead of studying the Ten Commandments, Victor?*

It was a shame that Vic Junior's subconscious chose that moment to step out for a quick snack and a full-body massage, leaving his feckless conscious mind to eagerly reply, "You bet!"

"So be it." Bennie turned his eyes from Vic Junior's greed-glowing face to the scoreboard.

Numbers twinkled. Numbers crunched. Numbers skittered and fluttered like a yard full of chickens on speed. All the zeroes in the Brothers' Meeting Bobcats' Bennie-less innings mutated to tens and twenties and portions thereof. A murmur went up from the stands. The umpire, blind to anything save the play at hand, commanded that the Taiwanese pitcher stop gawking at the scoreboard and get on with it. The boy, badly unnerved by this Western mystery, actually lost control of his first pitch, leaving a startled Bobby Drummer to get a single.

"What are You doing?" Vic Junior seized Bennie by the sleeve.

"Just what you asked," Bennie replied. "I'm giving you more runs."

"Not *that* way!" Vic Junior moaned. "They're gonna think we dicked around with the scoreboard somehow and disqualify us!"

"'Dicked around'?" Bennie repeated, the picture of (no surprise) innocence. "That's the first time I've ever heard anyone describe a miracle that way."

"Aw, Jeez, You know what I mean! I wanted us to get more runs on the board by *earning* them!"

"Oh." Bennie smiled and nodded.

The scoreboard winked one last time, then subsided. Its effect did not. Half of the Brothers' Meeting parents hooted, demanding that a higher score once posted ought to stay put. The other half shouted that it was all a ploy on the part of the visiting team to make it look like the Americans were cheating when everyone knew the computer system controlling the scoreboard was Made in Taiwan. Newsmen split and scattered throughout the stands, hoping

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to catch someone with unsportsmanlike foot in mouth, LIVE!

The coach of the Taiwanese team lost it. In the passion of the moment he forgot himself sufficiently to storm the Officials in their lair. The pitcher, stunned to see such behavior in a man he had previously thought of as less volatile than suet, let Jase McClellan connect for a double that placed a bewildered Bobby Drummer foursquare on third.

"I know what you're gonna do now," Vic Junior said, trembling. "You're gonna use this to teach me a moral lesson, like it's a parable or something. You let those guys get on base, and now You're gonna miss Your first two swings on purpose and You're gonna let it get down to the one last swing and if You think I repented enough for being a greedy prick, You'll get that last hit and bring Jase and Bobby home, but if You think I'm not sorry enough You'll strike out and we'll just win the championship by two lousy runs."

An awful afterthought ran him through like an icicle to the heart. "Or — or maybe You're really mad at me, and You're gonna make the scoreboard wipe out all our runs and we'll — we'll *lose*! After everything we went through to get here, You're gonna make us lose the championship! You're gonna smite *us*! You're gonna pour out Your wrath all over the Bobcats. That's what You're gonna do, right?"

"Who, Me?" Bennie touched the brim of his batting helmet in salute. "I'm just gonna play baseball." And he stepped up to the bat, leaving a white-lipped Vic Junior in the dugout behind him.

Maybe it's not a good notion to drop suggestions into certain Ears. When Nature comes up with new and improved ways to destroy big chunks of mankind, perhaps She's been cribbing over Humanity's shoulder. Heaven knows, we've done *our* part toward getting those pesky human stains off the face of the earth.

Heaven knows.

In any case, Bennie swung at the first pitch and missed. You'd think it was a bigger miracle than all the times he'd swung and connected for a homer, judging by the gasps that arose from the stands.

Bennie grinned. The Force that (Pick one: created/allowed Evolution to create) the emu, the mandrill, and disco music *has* to have an ironic sense of humor. He whiffed the second one, too.

Watching from the dugout, Coach Vic felt a sharp pain in his chest. He looked down and realized he'd ripped out a fistful of hair through his shirt.

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Had he begged and beseeched and groveled before the Officials, wildly plea-bargaining for them to overlook the missing paperwork until post-game, for *this*? ("Do it for *America*!" he'd implored. "Or I'll write up this whole incident and name names and send it in to *Reader's Digest*. You wanna be known as *The Men Who Stole The Children's Dream* for the rest of your lives?") The carpet burns on his knees still smarted.

What was it with Bennie? Sure, the Bobcats were set to win, but the kid's sudden attack of incompetence was no mere fluke. It felt more like a meaning-heavy omen, one that Vic wanted to see averted, and fast. The only hoodoo strong enough to do that would be seeing Jase and Bobby come home. Vic was too staunch a realist to believe that if his star struck out, anyone left in the batting order had the juice to do it, and he was sore afraid. He thought he heard the sound of much weeping and gnashing of teeth. He saw it was only Vic Junior having a conniption fit, babbling about Hell and wrath and smiting and Cooperstown. Coach Vic shook his head: That boy never did do well under pressure.

And then he heard a ghostly voice say unto him *Fear not*. He looked, and lo, there was Bennie giving him the thumbs-up sign. The boy hunkered down at the plate. He'd only been toying with the Taiwanese, yeah, that was it. Vic didn't know much, but he knew baseball, and he knew Bennie loved the game too much to let it down.

"Hold it right there!"

The man vaulted out of the stands, bullhorn in one hand, a piece of paper in the other. He surged across the field to home plate. The Taiwanese pitcher threw down ball and glove, folding up into the Lotus position until these crazy round-eyes could get it in gear and play the game. A security guard jumped the fence after the man. He caught him within arm's length of the umpire. The man calmly swacked the guard straight in the face with his bullhorn. The guard folded up into a less classical position than the Taiwanese pitcher.

"Who the hell are — ?" the umpire began. The man drew back his bullhorn in a gesture of invitation to a coma. The umpire bolted. The Taiwanese catcher dropped over backward onto his hands and scuttled away crabwise. The other players remained where they were, frozen on the field.

Alone at the plate with Bennie, the man raised the bullhorn to his lips and bellowed, *"There's been a mistake! This whole series doesn't count! The Bobcats should have been disqualified long ago!"*

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"Who the fuck asked you?" Sally McClellan didn't need a bullhorn to make herself heard. Phil tried to make her shut up. He got a surprise out of her pack of Crackerjacks that the manufacturer never put inside. *"Who the fuck* are *you?"* she added while Phil fumbled for a handkerchief to press to his bleeding nose.

"I'm Ward Gibbon, goddammit, and I refuse to see this game destroyed by cheaters! Why don't you ask this kid who the fuck he *is!"* Ward pointed dramatically at Bennie.

From the dugout, Vic Junior stopped his hysterics, heart somewhere up around the soft palate. The black look Bennie had given him for his greed was nothing compared to the glare Ward Gibbon was now getting from the kid at the plate.

"My name is Yeshua ben Jose. Are you calling me a cheater, Mr. Gibbon?" Bennie sounded modest and respectful and toxic. No one seemed to think it odd that his voice carried as far and farther than Ward's and Sally's combined, though he wasn't shouting at all.

"I call 'em like I see 'em, and this paper calls for plenty!" Ward rattled the sheet in Bennie's face, then waved it from side to side overhead in Perry Mason style, as if the whole stadium could see what it said. *"I've smelled something fishy about this team for a long time, so I did some research. This is a permission slip! Every Little Leaguer's got to have one of these on file!"*

Sally McClellan told Ward Gibbon where he could file it. Two of the major networks turned cameras on her.

Ward was implacable. *"This slip is filled out for Yeshua ben Jose by his coach, Victor Harris, but this slip is* not *signed!"*

"Excuse me, sir." Bennie tugged at Ward's arm. "You mean that because that paper's not signed, I can't play?"

Ward lowered the bullhorn. "That's right, son." He didn't mean his smile for a minute.

"Can't Coach Vic sign it for me?"

"'Fraid not. It's a *parental* permission slip. Only your father or mother can sign it."

"Yes, sir." Bennie nodded his head obediently. "Coach Vic told me about that, but he said it was all okay because he'd talked to the Commissioners and if I get it signed later on — "

Ward clapped the bullhorn to his mouth and bawled for the benefit of the

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stands, *"And how much did your Coach Vic* pay *the Commissioners to overlook a FLAGRANT VIOLATION OF THE RULES! That's* bribery *we're talking about!"*

"You bastard!" Coach Vic was on his feet, shaking his fists at Gibbon. *"You're* the one who raised that stink over Bennie's papers!" He lunged from the dugout, howling for Gibbon's blood. A quartet of loyal Bobcats flung themselves around his legs to save him from certain doom. Gibbon was big enough to snap their beloved Coach Vic into handy, bite-sized pieces one-handed, and he still had that bullhorn. Victor Harris got a good taste of diamond dirt when he went down. A helpful reporter was right there with a mike when he pushed himself up on his hands, spat dust, and shouted, *"I didn't bribe anyone!"*

"Well until you can prove that, that's all she wrote for playing this boy!" Gibbon countered. From the corner of his eye, he could see police streaming onto the field. They'd lock him up, but it would be worth it just to boot this miserable Jewboy's ass the hell out of the championship. "Sorry, son, you're history," he told Bennie.

"But I *love* baseball, sir. I really want to play." It was heartrending, that look in Bennie's eyes. It carried the distilled essence of nearly two thousand years of great Christian artworks portraying Jesus' suffering for Mankind's sins, plus a hefty slug of the ever-popular crown-of-thorns-on-black-velvet portraits. Who could resist such an appeal?

One guess. Two words. First word sounds like "Lord." Second word likes bananas.

Ward Gibbon's lip curled into a wolfish leer of triumph. "Tough, kid. You can't always get what you want."

History grants Mick Jagger the credit for originating that phrase, but the smart money knows it was first uttered by an unfeeling *hôtelier* a couple of millennia ago when a weary Nazarene carpenter knocked at Ye Olde Inne door in Bethlehem and said unto him, "My extremely great-with-child wife and I want a room for the night." There's a lot that's been written about what kids remember overhearing from their time *in utero*. Believe it all, especially about *this* kid. He remembered it, He didn't like it then, He liked it less now, and this time He was on the outside and able to make His anger felt.

"Sez you," He said. And lo, it came to pass.

The lightning bolt hit Ward Gibbon right up the bullhorn. You never did

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see a man achieve such instant mastery of hip-hop. Like that other famous Bush (the one that didn't need readable lips to make itself heard), he burned and was not consumed. Of course he yipped a lot.

But that was not all. This was no minor theological tantrum. No, this was a manifestation of the Divine displeasure, and that required more stage dressing.

The heavens opened. Rays of limpid light unfurled from the celestial heights, sending hosts of angels and gaggles of cherubs skidding down the heavenly speed slides. They hit the ground running and did beautiful springboard leaps to get airborne, then soared for the scoreboard. The numbers did that flicker thing again, this time mutating into letters that spelled out REPENT YE NOW, although because there were just nine spaces on the board it looked like REPNTYNOW. Sally McClellan said she was sure it was a city in Yugoslavia. The angels in their robes of glory sang hosannas. The cherubs, bum-nekkid, set up a counterpoint of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." That's cherubs for you.

As the heavenly choirs perched upon the top of the scoreboard, legions of demons burst from the bosom of the earth. Waving pitchforks and wearing regulation umpires' uniforms, they cavorted along the baselines with hellish glee. On second, Jase McClellan covered his eyes and wet his pants. Bobby Drummer tried to crawl under third base. The Taiwanese infield all started shouting at the top of their lungs. Either it was an ancient Oriental stratagem for driving off demons or they were just scared spitless, no one ever found out which. The demons abandoned the field and swarmed into the stands, throwing complimentary bags of piping hot Gluttony brand popcorn ™ to the crowd before they reached the top of the bleachers and vanished. It wasn't very good popcorn, but there was plenty of it.

As soon as the demons disappeared, Ward Gibbon stopped sizzling at home plate. He shook himself like a wet dog, astonished to discover he was still alive, though the bullhorn was past hope. He dropped the lump of slag and would have done so with the permission slip as well, only he could not stir hand nor foot. His sphincter was business as usual, though.

Aghast, astonished, embarrassed, he stared at Bennie and in an awe-struck whisper asked, "Who are you?"

"Who do you say I am?" Bennie replied.

"Ungh," was Ward's best comeback. The angels on the scoreboard held

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up placards reading 5.6, 5.8, 5.0, and so on. A cherub even jeered, "Throw the bum outa there!" Oh, those wacky cherubs!

Then, "Behold," said Bennie in a tone of awful majesty, and He did take His bat and lo, He did gesture therewith, and lo again, the object of his gesturing was the permission slip whereon were suddenly writ in characters of fire the four letters that are the Name of God.

That is, they might have been. There are no guarantees, and Lord knows, no hard evidence because, being characters of fire, they instantly reduced the permission slip to a smattering of ashes in Ward Gibbon's trembling hand.

"The slip's signed. The Bobcats' wins are legal. I'm going home before I smite someone," Bennie said. And without further ado, He did.

Well, would *you* have tried to stop Him?

After the paramedics took Ward Gibbon away and the Officials conferred and the angels wandered off and both teams took a much-needed potty-break, a judgment call was made:

"There is nothing in the rule books against having God on your side. Play ball!"

Vic Junior went up to bat, hit a single off the frazzled Taiwanese pitcher, and brought his teammates home. Jase McClellan's cleats squished when he ran and he never teased Vic Junior again.

When it was over, both teams skipped victory/consolation outings to Disneyworld or Japan or even the nearest ice cream parlor in favor of a quick scamper into the nearest house of worship. The Taiwanese pitcher got separated from his group and couldn't find a church, but he did find *something.* Later he got credit for bringing *santeriá* to Taipei, but that was about it as far as any repercussions worthy of the name.

VIC SENIOR wrote up the whole incident, couldn't sell it, and got that job at Four Corners Used Cars. When a story is an outright gift from God but the handwriting on the wall still reads *Mene, mene, tekel, does not suit our present needs,* the wise man finally admits it's time for a career change.

Barb wrote it up too, only she put in a lusty, long-legged, red-haired spitfire of a woman as the team coach. Later in the book she goes on to become the owner of a sprawling multibillion dollar sports equipment and cosmetics empire. Everyone knows that the infamous midnight "sushi sex" scene

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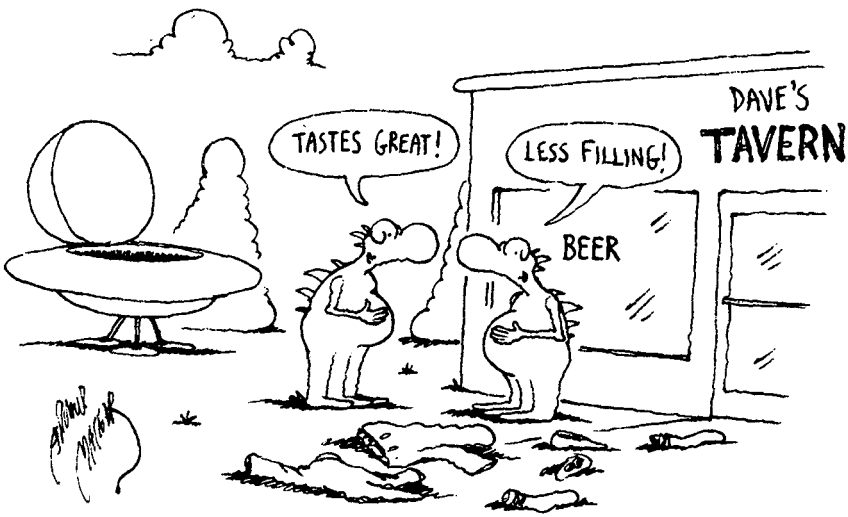
between Barb's heroine and the Taiwanese coach on the pitcher's mound was what sold the book and a heck of a lot of raw fish, besides.

After the divorce, Victor Harris went in for coaching Pop Warner football and tried to forget. And it worked, too, until the day at practice when he saw Vic Junior talking to a boy he'd never seen before. The stranger was about Vic Junior's height, three times as broad, four times as muscular, and sporting an uninhibited non-reg beard the color of a thunderhead. He'd brought his own helmet. He was clearly a Vikings fan.

The boy noticed Vic Senior staring at him and came over.

"Is this where the football tryouts are, sir?" he asked politely. "A mutual acquaintance said you might like to have me on your team." He stuck out his hand. "I'm Thor."

"Wait'll you're married," Victor Harris sighed.



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Robert Grossbach last appeared in F&SF *in April, 1985, with his story "Rift." He returns with the second baseball story of this issue, "A Feel for the Game."*

Robert belongs to that most passionate group of all baseball fans, the Brooklyn Dodger fans. Like his team, he has moved from New York to Los Angeles. "I suppose my move to LA began to stimulate some strong feeling of nostalgia," he writes, "and one day I simply felt an overwhelming compulsion to write this. I am usually a planner and a plodder but this one emerged, if you'll pardon the analogy, like a cat coughs up a hairball. It wasn't a bad feeling."

A Feel for the Game

By Robert Grossbach

IT WAS A STRANGE COMbination, businessman and speculator, collector, lover of baseball. Everyone at the convention had all the elements to some degree, but Curran knew it was a question of which motivation was dominant. If he could find that out, intuit it somehow, discern it, he might get an edge in the bidding.

He tried to keep his face impassive during the Lull, tried to stop the fingers on his left hand from tapping the side of his chair, tried to suppress the sweating, the throat clearing, the swallowing, the dozens of silent, autonomic betrayals of anxiety. The competition had to believe he was in control, calm, cold-blooded, ruthlessly relaxed enough to do whatever was necessary to get *The Duke.* Whatever was necessary.

He hadn't expected it, none of them had. Only twenty minutes earlier he'd been walking through the aisles, his mood a mixture of condescension and nostalgia. You found all kinds here, from the wide-eyed kid collectors offering individual packs of *Elston Darnell*'s at five New Yen each, to hard

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core (and hard surface) wheeler-dealers, looking for a quick score on a case of 21st century *Ki Fu*'s or a half dozen "specially preserved" *Dwight Gooden*'s. A hobbyist's tender compulsion expanded (and perverted) to unfeeling commercial carnivore. Conventions of this kind had spread across six terrestrial continents and three lunar colonies, and there was even talk that, next year, there'd be one on Ceres. It seemed like any place you had ten thousand people, regardless of whether there was any external atmosphere, two hundred were in the business.

Of course, baseball was only one category. There were basketball players and football players and actors and politicians. Hell, if you were intellectual, there were even novelists and scientists — but somehow the sound of "I'll trade you two Norman Mailers for a Stephen Hawking," just didn't feel right to Curran. For him, as for so many others, it was baseball that somehow remained special. Baseball, after all, had been first, starting with the tributes two centuries earlier, silver emulsions on cardboard, packaged with chewing gum and memorializing the ancient greats: Ty Cobb and Dizzy Dean, Joe D., Willie, Oisk, Aaron, Clemente, Mickey —

And *The Duke.*

He couldn't believe it when he heard it. He'd just paused at a station manned by a thirtyish woman hawking "mint condition" *Rip Repulski*'s, when the announcement came over the PA. "There will be an auction in the green room beginning in ten minutes. Among the players available is the Brooklyn Dodgers' Duke Snider, to be sold as a singleton."

Curran had been lightheaded, the funk lasting even through the auction's opening rounds. He'd been searching for The Duke for years, and now, out of the blue, here it was within his grasp. He'd emerged from his reverie only when the bidding had hit 40 thousand New Yen and the number of bidders had dropped to four. Quickly, Curran had upped the stakes, punching in 53 thousand New Yen and forcing out all but the final two before the Lull.

He knew one of the remaining players vaguely, a paunchy, sour faced man named Rabinall, whom he'd briefly spoken to at a convention in Nuevo Miami in the early 2140's. Rabinall had wanted to buy a *Whitey Lockman* from him, but Curran had demurred at the last moment, stubbornly refusing to come down a final notch in price. *Speculator,* he'd thought. *Bottom-liner. In-and-outer,* with no feel for the game. Of course, it was quite irrational. The other bidder, a woman, was a mystery.

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Curran wondered: Had either of them ever played the actual sport, as he had? Were they holo fanatics, as he was, watching game after game, present and past, day after night, losing his wife, his kids, his job — until that *became* his job? Had they paid a hundred extra New Yen for the old baseball stats to be installed in their neuroplants, so that they could tell you, as he could, George Shuba's batting average in 1953, or Tiamo Victor's ERA in 2089?

Probably not...and probably better off for it.

The bidding was about to resume. Why the hell did it have to be live and not over holo? But, of course, that was the idea — smell your competition sweat. Feel his/her tension. Taste it in the air.

"I have a bid for 59K," announced the crisp synthetic voice of the auctioneer.

Curran looked at his screen. It was Rabinall. Curran had a decision to make, a tactic to decide on, and it had to be done quickly. He had an absolute upper spending limit of 75K. He was a moderately wealthy man, but he'd been investing heavily in his collection — all right, not investing, *indulging* — but the fact was he'd reached the very farthest edge of his credit. And so it came down to a matter of game psychology. Did he go right to the precipice at once, demonstrating thereby to the remaining bidders a cavalier fearlessness in spiraling the stakes...or did he methodically just top the other offers for as long as he could, hopefully projecting a kind of implacable persistence and saving what could be a significant amount of money?

He punched in 75K. And waited.

"Going once at 75K," said the auctioneer. A blue square appeared at the woman's position on the screen. She'd dropped out.

"Going twice..." said the auctioneer.

Curran could barely breathe. He had it, it was his, he'd finally —

Inside Rabinall's red square, a number came up: 80K. A nearly inaudible whimper escaped Curran's lips. It was over. *Finito.* He punched in his blue square, inhaled, and dazedly stood up. "Sold for 80K," he heard the auctioneer intone, from what sounded like a great distance. He was surprised to see the woman approaching.

"Too bad," she said. She was a blonde, not bad looking, impossible to tell (as it always was) if she'd ever been reconstructed.

"Win some, lose some," he noted stupidly.

"You know him?" she asked, tilting her chin in the direction of Rabinall,

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who was collecting his boxed *Duke* from the machine.

"Not really," said Curran. "He once tried to buy a Whitey Lockman from me, but that's about it." He paused. "You?"

"Sold him a Monte Irvin last year at Sao Paulo. Were you at that one?"

"I only go to eight a year. I missed Sao Paulo."

"He made quite a splash there. Took home a Willie Mays, if I recall correctly."

"Willie Mays?" Something began to jell in Curran's mind, a complex chain of neurons lost some inter-synaptic resistance. Whitey Lockman, Monte Irvin, Willie Mays.... He rubbed his eyes, and was not all that amazed to find Rabinall standing next to him.

"You still want *The Duke*," said the fleshy man, his tone flat and certain. He held the precious container in his pudgy hands.

"Yes," said Curran shakily.

"And you know what I'm after."

Curran inhaled. "You're collecting...Giants. New York Giants of the nineteen-fifties."

Rabinall lifted an eyebrow. Curran had misjudged him. Misjudged him entirely. There was passion here, and quite beyond the financial.

"Trade," said Rabinall.

"You haven't found another *Lockman*," ventured Curran, and he knew immediately he was correct. "So what is it, Whitey for the Duke?"

"Don't be absurd," said Rabinall. "The two weren't remotely comparable players. Check the stats. Check the market." He paused, pursed his lips. "I know you have a *Sal Maglie*."

So that was it! Matter of fact, Curran had several *Maglie*'s, because Maglie, over his career, had been both a Giant and a Dodger. Curran considered, inhaled (he hoped) inaudibly. He took one more shot. "I give you Maglie and Lockman, you give me the Duke — and a player to be named later. Market worth 10K."

"No player," said Rabinall. "Straight-up trade."

Curran waited, stalled just to see Rabinall sweat. Because he understood Rabinall fully now, understood him as well as he did himself. Finally, tight grin slowly widening, he said, "Deal."

Later, when it had all been done, the exchanges made, the guarantees signed, Curran had gone for a walk, childishly and foolhardily still clutching

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the singleton container of the Duke.

He'd done it, he finally had a team. Brooklyn Dodgers, circa 1952. Complete at every position. Erskine on the mound; Hodges, Robinson, Reese, and Cox in the infield; Campy behind the plate; Pafko, Furillo, and now Duke in the outfield. And he'd bring them to term, too. No computer investing for him, no hoarding the seeds without tasting the fruit. No sir. He hadn't bought all that equipment for nothing. The Artificial Womb alone had cost 40K; the Nano-neural Educator, 32K; the Growth Accelerator, a cool 75K (including re-conditioning).

Once more, he fondled the battery-cooled container, with its cargo of precious cells. He wondered from where on the Duke's lithe body they had come, whether they'd been donated or stolen, scraped or shed, sold legally or black-marketed. No matter, he'd have plenty of time to read the pedigrees, as he'd done so often before. One of the pleasures of ownership.

Yes, these cells would be cloned, all right. They'd develop, they'd mature, and the Duke would play again. Glide effortlessly through the green grass in center field to make a graceful, leaping, time-frozen catch against the fence. Lift a high drive to right with that sweet, fluid swing — a ball going, going, *gone* for a home run.

Yes, the Duke would return to the game. They all did, and why not? Sure, the Educator would pre-dispose them to accept the contracts he would offer — not that they wouldn't be eminently fair — but, more cogently (was he a mystic?), it was in their blood. To be a ballplayer. The best of the best. What else could they do?

They'd have a great time. He'd take them on tour, his own team, and they'd play everyone. The tragic 2032 Eagles, whose cells were all scraped from the site of the sub-orbital crash. The awful 1998 Florida Marlins, losers of 136 games in a single season. The 2129 Slashers, with the robot third baseman. All of them, every one.

Some day, thought Curran, they might even meet the 1950's New York Giants. And, come to think of it, Sal Maglie might conceivably end up pitching for each team. The thought made him smile. Now *that* would be a game.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Gift of Story, by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Ballantine Books, 1993; 32pp.

THE traditional story around which this slim volume is written will probably be familiar to most readers from O. Henry's 1905 version, "Gifts of the Magi," but don't let that familiarity put you off. Estés presents it in the form of literary Chinese puzzle boxes — stories within stories — and it's her accompanying material that adds new resonance to the well-known story and makes it worth rereading.

Estés is the author of *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (Ballantine, 1992), a work in which she describes the process whereby stories can heal and guide as well as entertain. But stories also form our histories — as individuals and families, all the way through to cultures and the human race as a whole. There are no unimportant stories for they all add to the sum of who we are and it's this aspect of story that Estés explores here.

"Though none of us lives forever," she writes, "the stories can." They form a direct link between those who came before us in this world to those who follow and so we should cherish them and nourish them. And pass them on.

Estés approaches story from the position of a *cantadore*, a keeper of the old stories. Her background is Hungarian and Latina. But this idea of story as medicine ranges across many cultures, as witness this quote from *Crow and Weasel*, (Random House, 1990), a children's book based on Native American traditions by the nature essayist Barry Lopez:

"Remember only this one thing. The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each

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other's memory. This is how people care for themselves."

In terms of story, what is enough? Estés asks at the beginning of *The Gift of Story*. So long as the stories go on, she tells us at the end, so long as at least one person survives to tell them, and by doing so, ensures that their medicine lives on to better the world, "It will be enough."

Unconquered Countries, by Geoff Ryman, St. Martin's Press, April 1994; 288pp; $20.95.

Readers who came to discover Geoff Ryman through either of his last two novels, *The Child Garden* (St. Martin's Press, 1990) or *Was* (Knopf, 1992) will realize with this collection of novellas that Ryman's gift for story and language isn't a recent phenomenon. Although two of the novellas are unpublished, they were all written between 1976 and 1989.

The two unpublished novellas are particularly fascinating as it's difficult to understand why they haven't been available until now. "A Fall of Angels" is a piece of hard sf set in a future society dedicated to battling entropy no matter what the cost. The angels of the title are humans who have been transformed into bodiless beings that are sent out into space on exploratory probes. The story told here is of what happens when a pair of the angels comes upon an alien intelligence and rebel against "Control" safely ensconced in their headquarters and uninterested in anything except the bottom line of their mission. Ryman relates the events in a series of excerpts from history texts, correspondence and transcripts that instead of distancing the reader become all the more powerful for how Ryman manages to both maintain his hard speculative edge yet still present the humanity of his characters and the immediacy of their concerns.

The other previously unpublished piece, "Fan," is a stunning exploration of the mindset of a young woman named Billie who has a complete fixation upon an aging rock star. If "A Fall of Angels" is hard sf, then "Fan" is sf with a sociological slant—but it's in no wise soft. Ryman imbues Billie with all the desperation that makes up such a character but still lets us retain a sympathy for her. Eschewing violence as an inevitable conclusion, he concentrated instead upon the process whereby Billie fell under the star's spell and how despairing she feels so many years after when she realizes the hopelessness of her situation but still finds herself unable to break the habit of

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adulation. A superb and very timely story.

Both the reprints are political sf and they're just as good as the first two selections, if not better. "O Happy Day!" first appeared in *Interzone: The 1st Anthology* while *The Unconquered Country* was released in this country as a paperback and subsequently won the World Fantasy Award. The first is a provocative exploration of the question of gender politics taken to its extreme while the latter is a moving description of the inevitable results of war.

Taken as whole this collection makes for one of the most intelligent and rewarding books the field has produced; in fact, the next time you're in the company of someone disparaging sf, hand them a copy of *Unconquered Countries* and then try to accept their ensuing apologies as gracefully as possible.

The Willows in Winter, by William Horwood, HarperCollins, 1993; UK £12.99.

I'm not sure that I understand the need for posthumous sequels to such well-known classics as *Gone with the Wind* (1936) or, as the case here, Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). If the author (and who knows the characters better?) had more to say on the subject, he or she would certainly have done so. Readers who wish to reacquaint themselves with the company of beloved characters have only to return to the book in question and turn to the first page once more.

With *The Wind in the Willows* the idea of a sequel isn't even such a startling concept. I can think of a couple of other attempts immediately: *Wild Wood* by Jan Needle (Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1981) which played with the conceit of telling the events of the original story, in particular the invasion of Toad Hall, from the points of view of the weasels and stoats. There was also the less successful *A Fresh Wind in the Willows* by Dixon Scott (Heinemann/Quixote press, 1983); one has only to consider its title to realize how original its concept is.

And I don't doubt there have been others.

But if Grahame's classic novel *did* require a sequel, I suppose that William Horwood would have to be the best choice to write one at this particular time. He certainly has the right credentials. From his Duncton Wood series we see that Horwood is well-versed in small animal lore and descriptions of nature. And even if the series has gone on for a little too long by now (six very long books and,

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no doubt, counting), the first book was quite enchanting in its own way. More to the point, Horwood is also the author of a couple of forgotten fantasy classics — *The Stonor Eagles* (Watts, 1982) and *Callanish* (Watts, 1984); serious, thought-provoking novels that will surely outlive his more commercially popular series work and this sequel presently under discussion.

For *The Willows in Winter* Horwood has adapted Grahame's voice and done a fairly good job of it, while the illustrations by Patrick Benson echo Ernest Shepherd's famous artwork yet still retain Benson's individual touch. So the book certainly has the look and feel of the original upon which it is based. It's only when one has read through to the end that the dissimilarities become apparent.

Horwood obviously knows and loves his rivercraft and the small animals that make their homes along its banks as much as did Grahame. They both went to Oxford and they seem to think along similar enough lines so that Horwood can easily slip into the conversational mannerisms and social mores with which Grahame infused the original work. But duplicating another author's style isn't enough, for what can't be duplicated so readily are the hidden resonances that make a work either sing or fail.

Whatever other beliefs Grahame might have held (I know little about the man beyond his having authored one of my favorite books), when it came to writing for children Grahame had a true gift of creating a conduit between his readers and some deep, inarticulate well of mystery and miracles. Perhaps it was because he believed that "children are not merely people. In their simple acceptance of the mood of wonderment, their readiness to welcome a perfect miracle at any hour of the day or night, they are the only really living people that have been left to us in an over-weary world." So Grahame spoke directly to the child, and to the echo of the child that survives in some adults.

Much of the charm of the original work was in Grahame's obvious delight in simple pastoral pleasures and how effectively he could describe them: Sculling on the river and picnics on its banks. Wassailing at yuletime. The comforts of companionship and one's home. There was also a wonderful sense of old mysteries present in Grahame's book — chapters such as "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn" and "Dulce Domum," both of which, unfortunately, have sometimes been edited out of more recent editions.

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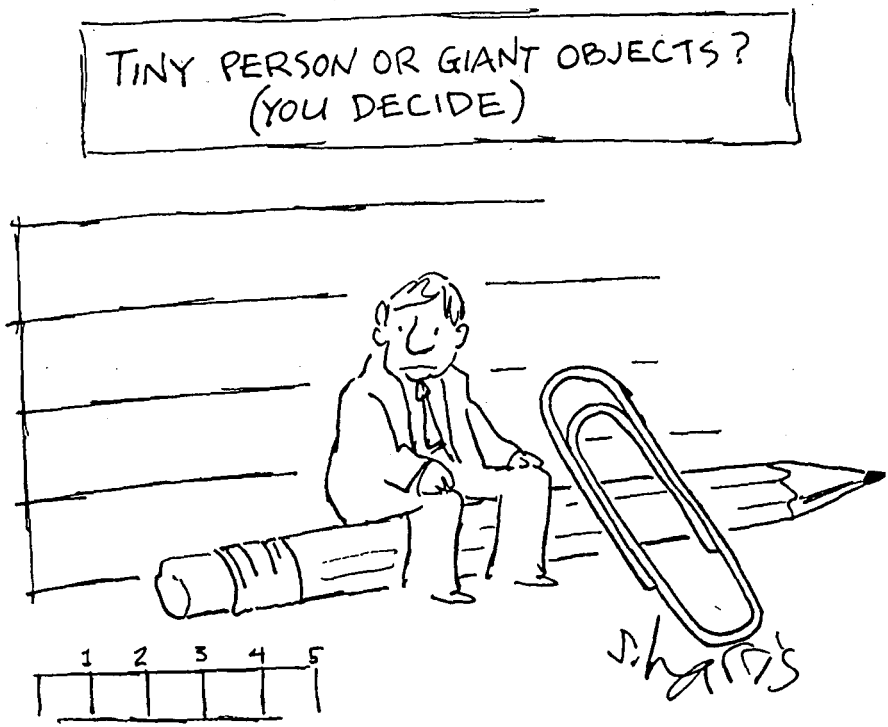
Horwood attempts to include these elements, but for some reason can't quite pull it off as effectively here as he has in his own books. Instead most of the focus of the two principle storylines is on drama — Mole going missing and Toad's usual misadventures. More disappointingly, both storylines have the same ending: a memorial service for Mole ends with Mole arriving unexpectedly which is repeated later in the book with a memorial party for Toad with Toad arriving unexpectedly.

The book Horwood has written is diverting, but ultimately unsatisfying. As is usually the case, readers who wish to spend more time with favorite characters, be they animals from *The Wind in the Willows*, Sherlock Holmes, or Robert E. Howard's various creations, are always better off returning to the original work and rereading it.

Books to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 8480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.



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Jerry Oltion's short fiction has won the Analog *Reader's Choice award (for "The Love Song of Laura Morrison") and has been a finalist for the Science Fiction Writers of America's prestigious Nebula Award. His stories have appeared in* Analog, F&SF, Pulphouse, Science Fiction Review, *and various anthologies. His novels include* Frame of Reference, *and two books in the* Isaac Asimov's Robot City *series:* Alliance *and* Humanity. *He last appeared in* F&SF *in September, 1993, with his humorous short story, "Blue Light Special."*

Abridged Edition

By Jerry Oltion

QUINOA WASN'T IN THE dictionary. Owen checked twice, but the listings went straight from quinine to quinoid.

Thinking he must have misspelled it, he looked back to the box of Bengal Spice tea where he'd read quinoa among the list of ingredients, but now he couldn't locate it there, either. He'd have sworn he'd seen it after nutmeg and cloves, but now cloves was the last ingredient.

Nor could he find anything he could have misread to produce the word. That was odd. Must be the stress, he thought. Seeing words that weren't there wouldn't be the first strange thing he'd done since losing both Richard and his job.

He set the dictionary down on the countertop separating the kitchen from the living room. The walls above the loveseat and the stereo didn't look so bare anymore — he had stapled up Van Gogh poster prints where Richard's paintings had been — but the bookshelves and the CD rack were still full of

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gaps. Those would take a while to refill.

The tea's spicy aroma filled the kitchen. Owen lifted the cup, blew across the top, and took a sip. Something about it *did* suggest India, or Arabia. Foreign, anyway. It tasted fine even without quinoa.

He took both cup and dictionary down the hallway into his study. Spreading the morning newspaper out on his drafting table, he pulled aside the curtain on the street-facing window to give him more light and began the morning ritual of looking through the want ads. He found the usual glut of accounting and auto body jobs, but once again no draftsmen. Plenty of restaurant jobs and sales positions, but no openings for surveyors, either. If this kept up, he was going to run out of unemployment compensation before he found anything.

Another ad caught his attention: Stevedore. There was no job description, just a number to call. Owen tried to remember what a stevedore did, but if he'd ever known, he'd forgotten it. Well, no problem; he had the dictionary right there. He flipped it open and paged through the S's.

No stevedore. The listing went from stethoscope to stew. Hmm, he thought. Wasn't much of a dictionary, was it? He shook his head sadly. The dictionary — like the tea — had belonged to his housemate, until Richard had left for Calcutta three months ago to join an eastern religion Owen couldn't even pronounce. Owen had sneaked it out of a packing box so he'd have something of Richard's to remember him by, but until lately he hadn't felt the need to actually use it. Good thing; even now the disappointment was intense, like being rejected all over again.

That was silly. It was just a dictionary, and not a very good one at that. He was trying hard not to be vengeful about it, but even so, a dictionary without "stevedore" was missing something.

He flipped to the F's, remembering how as a kid he used to look up dirty words for fun, but "fuck" wasn't there. Nor was "fornicate." Well, that was somehow appropriate. Since Richard had left, Owen hadn't had so much as a date. Not that he hadn't tried, but one of the people he'd attempted to strike up a relationship with had turned out to be his boss's nephew, and now he was out of a job.

He closed the dictionary and looked back to the paper. Maybe he would just call the number and ask what a stevedore was. But when he looked for the ad, he couldn't find that, either.

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What the heck? He traced the columns of jobs. They were alphabetized; he saw sales, screen printers, steelworkers, then summer jobs. No stevedore. But it had been there just a minute ago. He wouldn't have made up a whole job listing, not for something as unlikely as "stevedore."

There was another explanation, of course. An easily testable one, too, save that it was completely crazy to imagine it could be true.

Owen didn't mind. Right now he felt as if he were at least halfway insane anyway. So he picked another ad from the paper — taxi driver — and flipped through the dictionary to the T's. No listing for taxi.

He'd kept his finger on the ad for taxi drivers, but when he looked back down, it now pointed to "teachers."

Owen stared at the newspaper for a long while, not really seeing anything printed there. He shifted his gaze to the dictionary. It looked like a standard collegiate, hardbound in red cloth, but instead of Webster's, the name read, "Drake's Deleting Dictionary."

Where had Richard gotten it? Owen had no idea. He looked for a publisher's mark on the copyright page, but there was no copyright page. Good grief, did it contain *anything* it was supposed to?

Of course it did. It was full of definitions. Owen opened it at random — the pages parted to the same F's he'd been at before — and read the first entry he saw: fundamentalist, noun: an adherent of fundamentalism. He closed the dictionary, wondering why it would have fundamentalist but not stevedore, then a sudden suspicion made him open it to the F's again. No fundamentalist. There was fundament, and fundus, but no fundamentalist. Or fundamentalism either, for that matter. Evidently whatever he intentionally looked up disappeared.

Too bad I couldn't get rid of the real thing that easily, he thought. The fundies and their anti-gay attitudes had been a thorn in his side ever since...ever since when? Come to think of it, they'd never really amounted to much after their "no special rights" ballot measure had died at the polls. Owen hadn't heard much about them for over a year.

Or had he? There was a fuzziness to his thoughts that bothered him. Hadn't he just read in today's paper that they were planning to introduce another bill in the state senate? He dug out the front page and scanned the headlines. Nothing about it. Just an article on the chronic public transportation problems, another about a mysterious crop failure in the Peruvian

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Andes, and another about a new automated cargo-handling system for unloading ships.

The hair was beginning to stand up on the back of his neck. Had he somehow wiped out the entire *concept* of fundamentalism just by looking it up in Richard's dictionary? It seemed impossible, but so did want ads vanishing, and ingredients from his tea.

He needed something he could test. Something physical that he knew was there, like the teacup. Good enough: Teacup. He opened the dictionary to the T's and ran his finger down the column past "teacher."

He heard a wet *sploosh* beside him, and hot tea flooded the drafting table. It ran off the edge onto his lap, and he leaped up, howling in pain and fear. Jesus, the cup had just vanished. He ran for the kitchen and pulled a handful of paper towels off the roll beneath the cupboard, then ran back and sopped up what hadn't already soaked into the newspaper or dripped to the floor.

The dictionary had been splashed, too. Owen wiped off the wet pages and fluttered them until they were dry, then threw away the towels and the soggy newspaper and sat back down at the table.

Richard's dictionary could make things disappear. Why hadn't he used it? Owen wondered, then he thought, Maybe he had. Who could say what the world had been like before Richard started tinkering with it? Unless Owen had been involved directly, he probably wouldn't have remembered the changes.

Whatever Richard might have done, there was still plenty left for Owen to do. The possibilities were endless. He quickly looked up "prejudice" and "bigotry." Neither one was listed, and presumably neither concept existed now, either. He shuffled through the papers on his drafting table and found the envelope his last paycheck had come in, but the pink slip was still there. Too subtle, maybe? He tried "unemployment," and that time he got results.

The pink slip had disappeared, but so had his paycheck. And something had changed down by his feet. Owen looked down and found a chain connecting his left ankle to his drafting table. What the — ?

A loud crack came from outside, and someone screamed. Owen scooted over to the window — he had to stretch out his leg to reach it — and looked out. A line of convicts shuffled past on the sidewalk, chained together at the ankles just like he was chained to his desk, and a burly guard paced along beside them, flicking a whip to lash the back of anyone who stumbled.

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"Holy shit," Owen whispered. "Those aren't convicts; they're slaves." And so was he. He'd eliminated unemployment, all right.

Frantically, he looked up "slavery," and sighed in relief when the chain vanished from his ankle. He looked out the window again and was reassured to see just the normal pedestrian traffic. Well, not necessarily "normal"; everyone seemed to be striding along with much more determination than usual, as if they had places to go and no time to waste. Better than dragging chains, though.

Owen looked back to his drafting table. He didn't recognize the half-finished and now tea-stained topographic map taped there...but the longer he looked at it, the more familiar it became. A freelance job? Yes, that was it. He dug through the papers until he found the job order, complete with a check for half the work in advance.

All right. He'd squeaked through on that one. Maybe it was time to put the dictionary away before he got into worse trouble. But he still had one problem...

He considered looking up "abandonment," but he wasn't so sure he wanted Richard back. What he wanted was a new companion, someone who wouldn't leave him for an eastern religion. What he wanted was not to be lonely anymore.

Yes, of course! He eagerly flipped through the L's, looking — for the last time in his life — for "loneliness."

It wasn't there, of course.

He heard a soft noise from the other side of the house. A sigh? Good God, had the mysterious dictionary actually created a companion for him already? Without his even having to go out? He stood up from his drafting table and walked hesitantly down the hallway into the living room, at once hopeful and afraid of what he might find, but his trepidation melted away when he saw the soft, fuzzy golden labrador puppy.

Hmm. Not exactly what he'd been expecting, but when the puppy tilted its head sideways and blinked at him with its big round eyes, he couldn't help smiling. He hefted the dictionary in his hand, then laid it down on the coffee table. Plenty of time for fine-tuning later.

But by the time the puppy had messed on the carpet and chewed up his shoes, it had already eaten the dictionary.

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Kent Patterson works as Regional Editor for Oregon Business Magazine. *His short fiction has appeared in* Analog, Amazing Stories, *and* Pulphouse. *He has also written nine software manuals, edited a sports magazine, and written advertising copy even less believable than his fiction.*

"As far as I know," Kent writes," this is the first yam to star in a story for a major magazine. I hope it provides a role model for talented young yams everywhere."

The Wereyam

By Kent Patterson

WHEN THE CLOYING ODOR of scorched marshmallow and hot yam filled the greenhouse, Bill Mauer cursed softly. Another damned premature. He got up from his watchman's cot. The light of the full moon gleamed on the glass walls, throwing ghostly shadows over a jungle of yam vines as high as his head. He could see nothing, but the smell of hot candied yam grew stronger by the second.

Sighing, Bill picked up his auto-rooter. Nothing to do but find the premature and dig it out before the yam burst and let the bad strain of nanocritters contaminate the whole patch.

Bioengineered self-cooking yams had made his fortune. Self-cookers let even the busiest houseperson serve his/her family with nutritious meals with all of the rich goodness of genuine home cooking. But somehow the new, improved yams with the automatic self-candying option just weren't working out. He should have known better than to buy his yam nanotechnology from a firm calling itself "WerTech Transformations."

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As Bill walked down the shadowy corridor sniffing out the premature, yam plants rustled in the wind, their dry leaves scratching against the glass walls. Now a yam runner caught around Bill's ankle, and he bent over to unwrap it.

Wait a minute. There was no wind *inside* the greenhouse. Spooked, Bill ripped the yam loose, but a dozen others gripped his other ankle. He kicked viciously, but more and more vines clutched at his arms and legs. He tried to scream, but a burning hot candied yam thrust through his lips, cramming itself into his mouth and choking off the air.

A sharp yam stem plunged into his jugular, and a hot wave of pain struck as tiny nanocritters surged through his arteries, multiplying in their millions, transforming every protein, every molecule of his body. His arms and legs withered away, and his torso grew large, globular, yam shaped.

And now Bill, for the first time in his life, understood yams. He understood the softness of the mothering soil. He understood sunshine, the feel of rain, gentle as butterfly's wings, upon yam leaves. But most of all, he understood yam pain, the brutal heat of an oven, the steel of a knife slashing through the skin.

Now he understood forks.

He understood cruel white teeth tearing at the tender yellow flesh, and all the degrading vocabulary of man's inhumanity to yams. Rage flowed through his body, white, screaming anger. He felt a thirst for vengeance which must be satisfied, and could only be satisfied with blood, enough blood to drown centuries of oppression, millennia of baked yams, boiled yams, yams on the side, yams with butter, yams with sour cream, and worse, yes, worse than all of those — candied yams.

Now the light of the full moon gleamed on the glass walls of the greenhouse. Bill's transformation was complete. Like a huge round moon he rolled to the greenhouse door, and a great rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward the grocery stores to be born.

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Robert Vamosi attended Clarion West Writers Workshop last summer. He is a graduate of Northwestern University with a double major in Film and English Literature. While in college he received an arts grant that allowed him to write, co-produce and co-direct an original 16mm film, "The Contender," which was later nominated for several student film awards. Now he works in a technical bookstore in Silicon Valley. His fiction previously appeared in Amazing Stories. *"With or Without You" marks his first sale to* F&SF.

With or Without You

By Robert Vamosi

KERRY, MY LIVE-IN LOVER, is uncertain about our future. She tells me this in the Addiction/Recovery aisle of Stacey's Bookstore in Cupertino, only sound and picture are not in sync. I see Kerry's lips move. I feel the soft explosion of her breath reverberate with sound. But my lingering image of this moment will forever remain not of her soft skin, not her fabulous blue eyes, nor even her taut mouth whose lingual penetration was all that occupied my free time these last few weeks; it will be of the horror novels just beyond her, their matte black covers oozing blood onto her auburn-red hair while soft Muzak plays "Moonlight Sonata," drowning out the manifold reasons we cannot continue to live together.

"Joe is picking me up," she says, turning to go.

"Joe?"

Early this morning the actress Lauren Rogers died, and with her my first and only real shot at working on a feature film. Now, Kerry decides it's time for her to move out. I loiter about the bookstore in a funk, my mind obsessed

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with the film, with Kerry.

My beeper sounds.

Coolridge, *Coda*'s director, appears on my remote, the tiny chip-screen I pull from my waistband. She's in L.A., at home. She looks like she needs sleep or at least a good smoke.

"Ron's having the wake at the house tonight," she say. "He expects you down here about eightish for dinner. Howard, he fully intends to finish the film." Her imagemail ends abruptly in a burst of colored confetti.

I should be happy that I still have a job, happy that I don't have to buy any of the career manuals I've just leafed through. I am not. I'm still upset. So for my trip down to L.A. tonight, I buy a horror novel, one with metallic blood dribbling down its matte black cover. I buy it because the woman screaming on the cover reminds me of Kerry.

Lauren's death came as no surprise. I remember Coolridge as most livid during those first forty-eight hours after Lauren collapsed in the middle of a scene last January, much more so than Ron, Lauren's husband and *Coda*'s producer. What few shoots we needed to finish principal photography were mostly close-ups and Ron felt we could scrap those of Lauren if it came to that. Coolridge disagreed.

"I'm not going into editing strapped with only a master shot and almost no choices. Dammit, Lauren was getting good. I want choices."

So Ron acquiesced.

The following morning I was in the Bay Area to conference with execs from Digitex. Perhaps you know the company. Two years ago they caused a stir with their Marilyn Monroe commercials: the singular way the dead actress, standing over that same New York steam vent she made famous almost forty years ago, turns and invites the home viewer to try her brand of feminine hygiene protection. Had Digitex not won a Cleo that year, the subsequent lawsuits would have buried the company then and there.

So the day after Lauren entered the hospital, I was in a tiny Silicon Valley conference room, watching Digitex's animation of Lauren Rogers on a twenty-nine-inch Sony. It was good. Having known her on and off the set, I thought they'd captured much of her personality in the forty-second clip.

That's what Ron wanted to hear. After one long conference call, we had a commitment to go.

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That evening, I celebrated with Ron and Coolridge over dinner back in L.A.

"Lauren's responding to medication," Ron said. He stabbed at his t-bone steak as though it was trying to leap off the plate. "Her prognosis is very good. She'll be back, they tell me, ready to loop dialogue, in no time."

"Bullshit—she's dying," Coolridge said. "You bastard, you kept that she was HIV positive from everyone. Even me."

"Patricia, you can't discriminate just because someone's a Positive." Ron smiled. "She'll be back to work in a few weeks."

"A few weeks, huh? Then what's Howard doing moving up to Cupertino?"

Ron, who could have played poker with the best and won, just looked at me as though seeing me for the first time and smiled. "Some insurance work. That's all."

Five hours after Coolridge called to say Ron was serious about finishing *Coda*, I arrive at Ron's house in L.A. The horror novel I read on the Bullet Train now rides low, just inside my jacket pocket, and Lew Spencer, the agent who receives me at the door, sees it and smiles. He asks if I'm secretly scripting the book for him on spec. When I say I'm not, he just laughs.

"Send it to me when you finish *Coda*. I have a feeling you'll be much in demand after *Coda*."

Without response, I take a complimentary drink and walk past him, into the living room.

Ron's house overlooks the Los Angeles Basin. It is past sunset, almost night when I arrive, so the City of Angels spread out below, with all its lights, looks about as real as the background of any local TV news set. This is the satellite-shaped house where DePalma lensed part of *Body Double* so I wander around the living room, recreating the moments from the film I once wrote about while doing my undergraduate film studies. I see many old faculty and classmates of mine mingling. I am still surprised to see the ol' boy network alive and well in this town of ego-slashing cutthroats.

Someone taps a glass, and all conversation abruptly ceases.

Ron stands atop the kitchen table, an urn in his outstretched hands. He invites a moment of silence as Tibetan monks march out of the bedroom, chanting, wafting the kind of incense which irritates my nose. Someone else sneezes. After this, Ron then relates a few anecdotes about Lauren's struggle

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to come to peace with death. For a man so close to his wife's mortality, he seems strangely calm this evening. Even jocular.

"She said, at the end, 'Honey, with the kind of films I've made, I'm *so* used to dying....'"

The music starts again and Coolridge calls me over. At first she wants to know how it's going, so I tell her about Kerry, about Joe. But Coolridge's eyes begin to wander, her attention begins to follow. I ask her about the film, our mutual bond.

"Well," she says, staring me down, "I don't like Digitex's rushes. Oh, don't take it personally. I just don't think this techno-crap can salvage *Coda*."

I nod and look out the window, distracted. Someone has lit fireworks in the Canyon. Red, blue, and yellow fire blossoms peak outside Ron's house. Watching them, I feel further removed from the party. I think of the night a friend and I sneaked aboard the Queen Mary in Long Beach, and watched the fireworks intended only for paying guests. *So long ago....*

"Howard," says Coolridge, ending my reverie, "I'm not in control anymore." At first I consider the drink in her hand, the slur to her speech, and quite possibly her sense of balance. Then I realize what she means.

"So file a grievance with the Guild."

"By the time they rule, the film will be out." She watches my eyes widen. "Oh, yes. Ron still intends to premiere *Coda* in New York and L.A. by the final week in December. A Golden Globe, if not an Oscar. You can buy the Globes at least."

I shake my head. "We're not even close. We're really pushing the technology up there."

"This isn't about technology. For a man who's just lost his wife of twenty years, Ron hasn't a care in the world. Least of all technology."

At that moment I happen to see our host, the film's producer, good ol' Ron, atop the piano, doing a jig. He turns and perhaps he sees his director and her assistant. Perhaps because he smiles and waves when I smile back.

"This is about something larger," Coolridge continues, behind me. "Something more...." I turn and find that Coolridge has gone out onto the balcony to vomit.

Back in Cupertino the morning after Lauren Rogers' wake, I watch the dead actress smile and give her lines on a tiny Sony monitor. Flawlessly.

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Watching this, I hear Coolridge's doubts recirculate in my mind.

"It's too smooth," I say, slamming down my coffee mug. "Can you...?"

They cannot. Even before I ask, I see their answer. These patient Digitex techs.

Susan, the one with the punk-red hair and the green eyes who's been putting up with me for the last two months without a protest, utters a single word: "Context."

J.D., her assistant who also might have been under instruction not to ruffle my feathers, agrees. "Yes. You know, Howard, the Kuleshov effect."

I lean back in my chair, amazed. For the last two months, I've sensed these Digitex employees to be little more than digital hackers, graphic artists who dream only in bytes and hexadecimal beauty. Instead, both have film degrees. Moreover, they might even have a point.

The Kuleshov effect, if I may digress, is when three or more shots — say a baby, a coffin, and a woman crying — are cut together. Did the woman lose her baby? Did the dead husband leave behind a grieving wife and child? Has the woman simply lived and died a sad life? Given the above information, each scenario is plausible. It's all in the context.

Tomorrow, Ron will arrive with the first cut scene. It will be the first incorporation of live action with our digital recreations. In the morning we'll know.

That night Coolridge calls. It's a hot evening, unusual for the Bay Area. While my small Cupertino apartment has amenities like air conditioning, I've chosen to save the Antarctic ozone and simply lie atop my bed in plaid boxers. Coolridge pretends not to notice. She's in town for the screening tomorrow morning, staying at the same Howard Johnsons I had, and from the narrow view visible behind her, I further see that it might even be the same room.

"The whole thing is funny," Coolridge says, not at all amused. "I should have realized *Coda* wasn't my picture from the start. Remember our production schedule?"

I did. We did a master shot for every scene within the first two weeks, and spent the rest of the time doing the cutaways. That's backward. It's expensive.

"Then money's no object," I say.

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"Not with the new toys you're playing with." Coolridge spies something on my bed, smiles. "Bordwell and Thompson. Latest edition. I too broke out my copy of *Film Art* the other day. Mine's a first edition, however."

I nod. I'd gone back to Stacey's and for a "computer bookstore," their film and film-making section is quite good. I'd gone there initially for the Thalmanns' texts on computer graphics, which of course they had. These, now scattered on my bed alongside the tenth edition of *Film Art*, didn't much interest Coolridge, however.

"Spline Algorithms. P-curves. Pixel ratio. These aren't film terms," she says. "You're no longer working on a 'film,' Howard. You're making a Saturday morning cartoon."

I say nothing. She is drunk, perhaps nervous about tomorrow morning's screening.

"When I was in film school," she continues, "we shot with Super-8 cameras and used little tape-splice editors. We had impromptu screenings in dark custodial closets in the journalism building late at night. I only got into TV because people I trusted said that I'd one day get into films. Well, look at me. I'm forty and I'm still not making films for a living. You, however, are lucky. There are only a few people in this town who work *only* in film. Film is an art, remember that. Video...is a wasteland."

EIGHT A.M. the next morning, we gather in the Digitex screening room. Coolridge, who joined me for breakfast, now smokes neurotically while Ron, who flew in only moments before, stands behind us in the projection booth. He is supervising the union projectionist's loading of the first intercut sequence of *Coda*.

The lights dim. The scene, originally shot in front of a New York town house on the New Paramount backlot, lasts a mere two minutes. After, no one breathes.

Was it live or was it Digitex?

Or maybe the Kuleshov effect.

All of Lauren's close-ups in the cut scene were digitally rendered. She never spoke a word of the dialogue in real life. And yet her co-star, an actor very much alive today, seemed more wooden, almost dead on screen when compared with Lauren's simulation. *Something's wrong,* I think.

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"Assuming we correct the loss in image resolution," Ron says, smiling, "audiences won't suspect a thing. We'll have our hit after all."

Coolridge shakes her head. "Holly's one of the best editors working, but she needs more freedom. I can't put constraints like this on her choices."

"Nonsense," says Ron, smiling more like a televangelist. "It's like the New York City Street set we used at Paramount — it all looks fine until you turn the corner. Careful editing will keep everyone on the tour."

I say nothing. I can't say I've slid neatly into Coolridge's camp. I can't say, however, that I agree with Ron either. My sympathies do, however, go out to the poor actor upstaged by our glitzy computer graphics.

By noon, both Ron and Coolridge depart again for L.A. I am to stay and continue working with Digitex until further notice. We are to finish in one month.

When I return home, I find that Kerry has called my machine. Several times. The "thing" with Joe didn't work out. She wants to move back, only I'm not convinced. I take my bike out and spend the rest of the day cycling the foothills of Stevens Creek Park, considering. Later, exhausted from my ride, I'm still not convinced.

In replaying Kerry's messages, I notice that she does not say "I was wrong" or "I've reconsidered." She says only that the "thing with Joe" didn't work out and I just now notice the bruise under one eye. Maybe it's only smudged mascara.

Joe has given her forty-eight hours to vacate.

That night I mix a new tape of Kerry at the Digitex studio.

Kerry's longest message lasts less than one minute. I begin with the background, stripping it away. She sits in a kitchen that must be Joe's Santa Clara address because low flying aircraft into San Jose International garble the sound on two of the four calls. Neutral light, no shadows, I know that the window faces north, the camera south against a midday sun. I isolate her face and have the computer trace her vowels, then certain, telltale diphthongs. From this new database I begin to script a new monologue.

While I'm at it, I clear up her left eye and brighten her overall demeanor. She now smiles like no other, this new talking head of Kerry. She now expresses her unending love for me in no uncertain terms.

"How could I have underestimated your love for me, Howard? These last

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forty-eight hours have been hell. Please, please take me back. I was wrong."

Using a Quantel Paintbox, I seat her near the pool at the Fairmont Hotel in downtown San Jose. I mix in the sounds and motions of people laughing and splashing into the pool behind her. She's using a cellular phone and near the very end, I have a waiter lean in with a glass of fine Napa Valley Cabernet.

Two hours later, I'm satisfied although the rough cut plays on the monitor in only ragged composites. Along the lower portion of the frame, strings of hexadecimals race, representing colors, sounds, and camera positions not yet rendered. This new message from Kerry lasts one minute twenty. I like the length so I instruct the machine to interpolate the missing frames, to smooth out motion within the frame and to correct for color.

Did I position the sun in front or behind her? *Damn.* I slip out for coffee while the machine silently contemplates this.

At the reception desk, the same reception desk where Kerry once worked and now a young man has filled in her vacant position, a call comes in for me. It is Coolridge. She sounds satisfied. She's left the production. She's quit *Coda.*

"My suggestion, kid, is that you do the same," she says. "What we're doing here is sick. It has nothing to do with art or reality. He's taken our creative control and mass-produced a blockbuster that I'll have no part of. Nor should you. *It's manipulative.*"

I think of that when I return to the editing suite to watch a beautifully, albeit artificially, rendered Kerry swear her eternal love. Watching this, I realize Coolridge's point first hand. *It is manipulative.*

Often a producer will retain the final cut of a film in exchange for someone's directorial freedom on the set. Changing a film's ending can be expensive — often rehiring cast and crew and possibly going on location — but sometimes the change is necessary, successful, as with Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction.* So what Digitex has created is a producer's ultimate toy — a relatively inexpensive way of manipulating an actor or a director's vision long after principal photography's completed.

It is a producer's way of having the final word.

Without hesitation, I queue up Kerry's original phone message and relearn that the "thing" with Joe isn't working out. I decide then and there that neither is this animation stuff. Reality may not be perfect but I kind of like it that way, and when I get home, I see that Ron has called. He wants to

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do lunch in L.A., tomorrow. Great. I decide to go, if only to hear what he has to say.

"'All progress, '" Ron quotes to me, "'is the result of people who took unpopular positions.' Adlai Stevenson once said that and I happen to believe it's true."

We're standing at Pink's on La Brea Avenue and Melrose, chewing dogs and swigging Israeli root beer. If this is his idea of networking with my generation, he's missed the point. Behind us passes a cherry-red convertible of cool dudes and hot babes, the rumble of their THX-mastered downbeat sounding like the Big One.

Ron, holding a shriveled frankfurter that is oozing relish and mustard precariously near his Pierre Cardin tie, looks ridiculous in his Gucci suit, a speck of conservatism amid the casual dress of Hollywood mid-afternoon. "We can't fight change, can we, Howard?" He's pointing the hot dog at me now.

"So what did Lauren think of change?" I ask.

"Her last picture was a dud. Do you think she wanted *Fools' Night Out* to be her last picture? Would you?"

I restate my question. "So what did Lauren think of spline algorithms generating her best and final performance?"

He looks away. "She wanted to keep working until the end. She wanted no one to suspect she was ill until the last moment."

"So I take it you kept your holdings in Digitex a secret from her."

His eyes flare. "What makes you think I even have any interest in that company?"

"Because, according to the current Digitex prospectus, you purchased controlling shares of stock about the time the Monroe commercial hit. It was a gamble — I'll credit you that — but to use it on your wife...."

He rests against a plastic chair. He is unable to speak, unable to take his eyes off me. I feel their pressure, their force upon me.

I no longer care what he thinks of me because I am now certain of my opinion of him.

"I was going to offer you directorial credit on *Coda*," he says, softly.

I should be flattered. The credits you see on the screen are often not in reality the names of those who made the film. They are the names the unions

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and guilds feel most deserve the credit. In an eye blink, all of Coolridge's hard work fades into blackness. Instead, for those same five full seconds, it is *my* name that is luminescent on the silver screen as director before sound and picture both fade in over a faux New York street scene....

"No." My decision is firm, though my voice is not. I start to walk away from him, my bravado quivering, failing me now. "No way."

"Then you'll never work in this town again."

"Actually," I call out, "I have yet to work in this town. But I get your drift."

My Cupertino landlady insists I'll find more work in the Bay Area. Actually, she doesn't want to screen new tenants. But all the action is truly in LA-LA land, so I tell her I'm moving back. Reluctantly, she posts the FOR RENT sign in the courtyard.

I return to my apartment with empty boxes from Safeway and find a message from Coolridge waiting on my machine. She says ever since news of her resignation surfaced, she's gotten hot. She says there are at least three development deals on her desk, and one is in the Bay Area. Whichever one she chooses, she still wants me as her right hand man. A call following hers, from Lew Spencer, confirms it. I save both recordings for future reference, then start packing.

It is mid-afternoon when I finish, when I get a call from Kerry. She's a mess, somewhat hysterical, and she needs to know what I've decided: if she can move back, or whether she should make other arrangements. I say, hey, no problems, no hard feelings. I'll leave the key under the front mat. Yeah, I add, if you'll just give me another half hour, I'll even meet you at Stacey's Bookstore down the street and after we can go play video games in the shopping mall next door. At this she smiles, happy and oblivious to the fact that in another half hour I plan to be traveling south along I-5 toward L.A. I have no intention of staying in Cupertino any longer than I have to. I have no real intention of ever seeing Kerry again. Her fantasy, not mine.

Reality, it may not always be perfect, but I kind of like it that way.

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SCIENCE

BRUCE STERLING

THE DEAD COLLIDER

IT CERTAINLY seemed like a grand idea at the time, the time being 1982, one of the break-the-bank years of the early Reagan Administration.

The Europeans at CERN, possessors of the world's largest particle accelerator, were planning to pave their massive Swiss tunnel with new, superconducting magnets. This would kick the European atom-smasher, already powerful, up to a massive 10 trillion electron volts.

In raw power, this would boost the Europeans decisively past their American rivals. America's most potent accelerator in 1982, Fermilab in Illinois, could manage a meager 2 TeV. And Fermilab's Tevatron, though upgraded several times, was an aging installation.

A more sophisticated machine, ISABELLE at Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York, had been planned in 1979 as Fermilab's successor at the forefront of American particle physics. But by 1982, it was clear that ISABELLE's ultra-sophisticated superconducting magnets had severe design troubles. The state-of-the-art bungling at Brookhaven was becoming an open embarrassment to the American particle-physics community. And even if the young ISABELLE facility overcame those problems and got their magnets to run, ISABELLE was intended to sacrifice raw power for sophistication; at best, ISABELLE would yield a feeble .8 TeV.

In August 1982, Leon Lederman, then director of Fermilab, made a bold and visionary proposal. In a conference talk to high-energy physicists gathered in Colorado, Lederman proposed canceling both ISABELLE and the latest Fermilab upgrade, in pursuit of a gigantic American

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particle accelerator that would utterly dwarf the best the Europeans had to offer, now or in the foreseeable future. He called it "The Machine in the Desert."

The "Desertron" (as Lederman first called it) would be the largest single scientific instrument in the world, employing a staff of more than two thousand people, plus students, teachers and various properly awestruck visiting scholars from overseas. It would be twenty times more powerful than Fermilab, and full sixty times more powerful than CERN circa 1982. The accelerator's fifty-four miles of deep tunnels, lined with hard-vacuum beamguides and helium-refrigerated giant magnets, would be fully the size of the Washington Beltway.

The cost: perhaps three billion dollars. It was thought that the cash-flush Japanese, who had been very envious of CERN for some time, would be willing to help the Americans in exchange for favored status at the complex.

The goal of the Desertron, or at least its target of choice, would be the Higgs scalar boson, a hypothetical subatomic entity theoretically responsible for the fact that other elementary particles have mass. The Higgs played a prominent part at the speculative edges of quantum theory's so-called "Standard Model," but its true nature and real properties were very much in doubt.

The Higgs boson would be a glittering prize indeed, though not so glittering as the gigantic lab itself. After a year of intense debate within the American high-energy-physics community, Lederman's argument won out.

His reasoning, and that of the scheme's numerous other backers, was firmly in the tradition of 20th-century particle physics. There seemed little question that the massive power and scale of the Desertron was the necessary next step for real progress in the field.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Ernest Rutherford (who coined the memorable slogan, "All science is either physics or stamp-collecting") discovered the nucleus of the atom with a mere five million electron volts. Rutherford's lab equipment was not much more sophisticated than string and sealing-wax. To get directly at neutrons and protons, however, took much more energy — a billion electron volts and a cyclotron. To get quark effects, some decades later, required ten billion volts and a synchrotron. To make quarks really stand up and dance in their full quantum oddity required a hundred billion electron volts and a

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machine that was miles across. And to get at the Higgs boson would need at least ten trillion eV, and given that the fantastically powerful collision would be a very messy affair, a full forty trillion — two particle beams of twenty TeV each, colliding head-on — was a much safer bet.

Throughout the century, then, every major new advance in particle studies had required massive new infusions of power. A machine for the 1990s, the end result of decades of development, would require truly titanic amounts of juice. The physics community had hesitated at this step, and had settled for years at niggling around in the low trillions of electron volts. But the field of sub-atomic studies was looking increasingly mined out, and the quantum Standard Model had not had a good paradigm-shattering kick in the pants in some time. From the perspective of the particle physicist, the Desertron, despite its necessarily colossal scale, made perfect scientific sense.

The Department of Energy, the bureaucratic descendant of the Atomic Energy Commission and the traditional federal patron of high-energy-physics, had more or less recovered from its last major money-wasting debacle, the Carter Administration's synthetic fuels program. Under new leadership, the DoE was sympathetic to an ambitious project with some workable and sellable rationale.

Lederman's tentative scheme was developed, over three years, in great detail, by an expert central design group of federally sponsored physicists and engineers from Lawrence Berkeley labs, Brookhaven and Fermilab. The "Desertron" was officially renamed the "Superconducting Super Collider." In 1986 the program proposal was carried to Ronald Reagan, then in his second term. While Reagan's cabinet seemed equally split on the merits of the SSC versus a much more modest research program, the Gipper decided the issue with one of his favorite football metaphors: "Throw deep."

Reagan's SSC was a deep throw indeed. The collider ring of Fermilab in Illinois was visible from space, and the grounds of Fermilab were big enough to boast their own herd of captive buffalo. But the ring of the mighty Super Collider made Fermilab's circumference look like a nickel on a dinner plate. One small section of the Super Collider, the High Energy Booster, was the size of Fermilab all by itself, but this Booster was only a humble injection device for the Super Collider.

The real action was to be in the fifty-four-mile, fourteen-foot-diameter

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Super Collider ring.

As if this titanic underground circus were not enough, the SSC also boasted two underground halls each over 300 feet long, to be stuffed with ultrasophisticated particle detectors so huge as to make their hard-helmeted minders resemble toy dolls. Along with the fifty-four miles of Collider were sixteen more miles of injection devices: the Linear Accelerator, the modest Low Energy Booster, the large Medium Energy Booster, the monster High Energy Booster, the Boosters acting like a set of gears to drive particles into evermore frenzied states of relativistic overdrive, before their release into the ferocious grip of the main Super Collider ring.

Along the curves and arcs of these wheels-within-wheels, and along the Super Collider ring itself, were more than forty vertical access shafts, some of them two hundred feet deep. Up on the surface, twelve separate refrigeration plants would pipe tons of ultra-frigid liquid helium to more than ten thousand superconducting magnets, buried deep within the earth. All by itself, the SSC would more than double the amount of helium refrigeration taking place in the entire planet.

The site would have miles of new-paved roads, vast cooling ponds of fresh water, brand-new electrical utilities. Massive new office complexes were to be built for support and research, including two separate East and West campuses at opposite ends of the Collider, and two offsite research labs. With thousands of computers: personal computers, CAD workstations, network servers, routers, massively parallel supercomputing simulators. Office and laboratory networking including Internet and videoconferencing. Assembly buildings, tank farms, archives, libraries, security offices, cafeterias. The works.

There were, of course, dissenters from the dream. Some high-energy physicists feared that the project, though workable and probably quite necessary for any real breakthrough in their field, was simply too much to ask. Enemies from outside the field likened the scheme to Reagan's Star Wars — an utter scientific farce — and to the Space Station, a political pork-barrel effort with scarcely a shred of real use in research — and to the hapless Space Shuttle, an overdesigned gobboon.

Within the field of high-energy-physics, though, the logic was too compelling and the traditional arc of development too strong. A few physicists — Freeman Dyson among them — quietly suggested that it might be

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time for a radically new tack; time to abandon the tried-and-true collider technology entirely, to try daringly novel, small-scale particle-acceleration schemes such as free-electron lasers, gyroklystrons, or wake-field accelerators. But that was not Big Thinking; and particle physics was the very exemplar of Big Science.

In the 1920s and 1930s, particle physicist Ernest Lawrence had practically invented "Big Science" with the Berkeley cyclotrons, each of them larger, more expensive, demanding greater resources and entire teams of scientists. Particle physics, in pursuit of ever-more-elusive particles, by its nature built huge, centralized facilities of ever greater complexity and ever greater expense for ever-larger staffs of researchers. There just wasn't any real-life way to do particle physics but the big way.

And then there was the competitive angle, the race for international prestige: high-energy physics as the arcane, scholarly equivalent of the nuclear arms race. The nuclear arms race itself was, of course, a direct result of progress in 20th-century high-energy physics. For Cold Warriors, nuclear science, with its firm linkage to military power, was the Big Science par excellence.

Leon Lederman and his colleague Sheldon Glashow played the patriotic card very strongly in their influential article of March 1985, "The SSC: A Machine for the Nineties." There they wrote: "Of course, as scientists, we must rejoice in the brilliant achievements of our colleagues overseas. Our concern is that if we forgo the opportunity that SSC offers for the 1990s, the loss will not only be to our science but also to the broader issue of national pride and technological self-confidence. When we were children, America did most things best. So it should again."

Lederman and Glashow also argued for the SSC on the grounds of potential spinoffs for American industry: energy storage, power transmission, new tunneling techniques, industrial demand-pull in superconductivity. In meeting "all but insuperable technical obstacles," they declared, American industries would learn better to compete. (There was no mention of what might happen to American "national pride and technological self-confidence" if American industries simply failed to meet those "insuperable obstacles" — as had already happened in ISABELLE.)

Glashow and Lederman also declared, with perhaps pardonable professional pride, that it was simply a good idea for America to create and employ large armies of particle physicists, pretty much for their own sake.

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"(P)article physics yields highly trained scientists accustomed to solving the unsolvable. They often go on to play vital roles in the rest of the world.... Many of us have become important contributors in the world of energy resources, neurophysiology, arms control and disarmament, high finance, defense technology and molecular biology.... High energy physics continues to attract and recruit into science its share of the best and brightest. If we were deprived of all those who began their careers with the lure and the dream of participating in this intellectual adventure, the nation would be considerably worse off than it is. Without the SSC, this is exactly what would come to pass."

Funding a gigantic physics lab may seem a peculiarly roundabout way to create, say, molecular biologists, especially when America's actual molecular biologists, no slouches at "solving the unsolvable" themselves, were getting none of the funding for the Super Collider.

When it came to creating experts in "high finance," however, the SSC was on much firmer ground. Financiers worked overtime as the SSC's cost estimates rose again and again, in leaps of billions. The Japanese were quite interested in basic research in superconductive technology; but when they learned they were expected to pay a great deal, but enjoy little of the actual technical development in superconductivity, they naturally balked. So did the Taiwanese, when an increasingly desperate SSC finally got around to asking them to help. The Europeans, recognizing a direct attempt to trump their treasured CERN collider, were superconductively chilly about the idea of investing in any Yankee dream-machine. Estimated cost of the project to the American taxpayer — or rather, the American deficit borrower — quickly jumped from 3.9 billion dollars to 4.9 billion, then 6.6 billion, then 8.25 billion, then 10 billion. Then, finally and fatally, to twelve.

Time and again the physicists went to the Congressional crap table, shot the dice for higher stakes, and somehow survived. Scientists outside the high-energy-physics community were livid with envy, but the powerful charisma of physics — that very well-advanced field that had given America the atomic bomb and a raft of Nobels — held firm against the jealous, increasingly bitter gaggle of "little science" advocates.

At the start of the project, the Congress was highly enthusiastic. The lucky winner of the SSC had a great deal to gain: a nucleus of high-tech

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development, scientific prestige, and billions in federally subsidized infrastructure investment. The Congressperson carrying the SSC home to the district would have a prize far beyond the usual water-project pork; that lucky politician would have trapped a mastodon.

At length the lucky winner of the elaborate site-selection process was announced: Waxahachie, Texas. Texas Congresspeople were, of course, ecstatic; but other competitors wondered what on earth Waxahachie had to offer that they couldn't.

Waxahachie's main appeal was simple: lots of Texas-sized room for a Texas-sized machine. The Super Collider would, in fact, entirely encircle the historic town of Waxahachie, some 18,000 easy-going folks in a rural county previously best known for desultory cotton-farming. The word "Waxahachie" originally meant "buffalo creek." Waxahachie was well-watered, wooded, farming country built on a bedrock of soft, chalky, easily excavated limestone.

Lederman, author of the Desertron proposal, rudely referred to Waxahachie as being "in Texas, in the desert" in his SSC promotional pop-science book *The God Particle*. There was no desert anywhere near Waxahachie, and worse yet, Lederman had serious problems correctly pronouncing the town's name.

The town of Waxahachie, a minor railroad boomtown in the 1870s and 1880s, had changed little during the twentieth century. In later years, Waxahachie had made a virtue of its fossilization. Downtown Waxahachie had a striking Victorian granite county courthouse and a brick-and-gingerbread historical district of downtown shops, mostly frequented by antique-hunting yuppies on day-trips from the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, twenty miles to the north. There was a certain amount of suburban sprawl on the north edge of town, at the edge of commuting range to south Dallas, but it hadn't affected the pace of local life much. Quiet, almost sepulchral Waxahachie was the most favored place in Texas for period moviemaking. Its lovely oak-shadowed graveyard was one of the most-photographed cemeteries in the entire USA.

This, then, was to become the new capital of the high-energy-physics community, the home of a global scientific community better known for Mozart and chablis than catfish and C&W. It seemed unbelievable. And it was unbelievable. Scientifically, Waxahachie made sense. Politically, Waxahachie could be sold.

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Culturally, Waxahachie made no sense whatsoever. A gesture by the federal government and a giant machine could not, in fact, transform good ol' Waxahachie into Berkeley or Chicago or Long Island. A mass migration of physicists might have worked for Los Alamos when hundreds of A-Bomb scientists had been smuggled there in top secrecy at the height of World War II, but there was no atomic war on at the moment. A persistent sense of culture shock and unreality haunted the SSC project from the beginning.

In his 1993 popular-science book *The God Particle*, Lederman made many glowing comparisons for the SSC: the cathedrals of Europe, the Pyramids, Stonehenge. But those things could all be seen. They all made instant sense even to illiterates. The SSC, unlike the Pyramids, was almost entirely invisible — a fifty-mile subterranean wormhole stuffed with deep-frozen magnets.

A trip out to the SSC revealed construction cranes, vast junkyards of wooden crating and metal piping, with a few drab, rectangular, hopelessly unromantic assembly buildings, buildings with all the architectural vibrancy of slab-sided machine-shops (which is what they were). Here and there were giant weedy talus-heaps of limestone drill-cuttings from the subterranean "TBM," or Tunnel Boring Machine. The Boring Machine was a state-of-the-art Boring Machine, but its workings were invisible to all but the hard-hats, and the machine itself was, well, boring.

Here and there along the SSC's fifty-four mile circumference, inexplicable white vents rose from the middle of muddy cottonfields. These were the SSC's ventilation and access shafts, all of them neatly padlocked in case some mischievous soul should attempt to see what all the fuss was about. Nothing at the SSC was anything like the heart-lifting spires of Notre Dame, or even the neat-o high-tech blast of an overpriced and rickety Space Shuttle. The place didn't look big or mystical or uplifting; it just looked dirty and flat and rather woebegone.

As a popular attraction the SSC was a bust; and time was not on the side of its planners and builders. As the Cold War waned, the basic prestige of nuclear physics was also wearing rather thin. Hard times had hit America, and hard times had come for American science.

Lederman himself, onetime chairman of the board of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, was painfully aware of the sense of malaise and decline. In 1990 and 1991, Lederman, as chairman of

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AAAS, polled his colleagues in universities across America about the basic state of Science in America. He heard, and published, a great outpouring of discontent. There was a litany of complaint from American scholars. Pernickety government oversight. Endless paperwork for grants, consuming up to thirty percent of a scientist's valuable research time. A general aging of the academic populace, with graying American scientists more inclined to look back to vanished glories than to anticipate new breakthroughs. Meanspirited insistence by both government and industry that basic research show immediate and tangible economic benefits. A loss of zest and interest in the future, replaced by a smallminded struggle to keep making daily ends meet.

It was getting hard to make a living out there. The competition for money and advancement inside science was getting fierce, downright ungentlemanly. Big wild dreams that led to big wild breakthroughs were being nipped in the bud by a general societal malaise and a failure of imagination. The federal research effort was still vast in scope, and had been growing steadily despite the steadily growing federal deficits. But thanks to decades of generous higher education and the alluring prestige of a life in research, there were now far more mouths to feed in the world of American Science. Vastly increased armies of grad students and postdocs found themselves waiting forever for tenure. They were forced to play careerist games over shrinking slices of the grantsmanship pie, rather than leaving money problems to the beancounters and getting mano-a-mano with the Big Questions.

"The 1950s and 1960s were great years for science in America," Lederman wrote nostalgically. "Compared to the much tougher 1990s, anyone with a good idea and a lot of determination, it seemed, could get his idea funded. Perhaps this is as good a criterion for healthy science as any." By this criterion, American science in the 90s was critically ill. The SSC seemed to offer a decisive way to break out of the cycle of decline, to return to those good old days. The Superconducting Super Collider would make Big Science really "super" again, not just once but twice.

The death of the project was slow, and agonizing, and painful. Again and again particle physicists went to Congress to put their hard-won prestige on the line, and their supporters used every tactic in the book. As *Science* magazine put in a grim postmortem editorial: "The

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typical hide-and-seek game of 'it's not the science, it's the jobs' on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and 'it's not about jobs, it is very good science' on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday wears thin after a while."

The House killed the Collider in June 1992; the Senate resurrected it. The House killed it again in June 1993, and the Senate once again puffed the breath of life into the corpse; but Reagan and Bush were out of power now. Reagan had supported SSC because he was, in his own strange way, a visionary; Bush, though usually more prudent, took care to protect his Texan political base. Bush did in fact win Texas in the presidential election of 1992, but winning Texas was not enough. The party was over. In October 1993 the Super Collider was killed yet again. And this time it stayed dead.

In January 1994 I went to Waxahachie to see the dead Collider.

To say that morale is low at the SSC Labs does not begin to capture the sentiment there. Morale is subterranean. There are still almost two thousand people employed at the dead project; not because they have anything much to do there, but because there is still a tad of funding left for them to consume — a meager six hundred million or so. And they also stay because, despite their alleged facility at transforming themselves into neurophysiologists, arms control advocates, et al., there is simply not a whole lot of market demand anywhere for particle physicists, at the moment.

The Dallas offices of the SSC Lab are a giant maze of cubicles, every one of them without exception sporting a networked color Macintosh. Employees have pinned up xeroxed office art indicative of their mood. One was a chart called:

"THE SIX PHASES OF A PROJECT:

I. Enthusiasm.

II. Disillusionment.

III. Panic.

IV. Search for the Guilty.

V. Punishment of the Innocent.

VI. Praise & Honor for the Nonparticipants."

According to the chart, the SSC is now at Phase Five, and headed for Six.

SSC staffers have a lot of rather dark jokes now. "The Sour Grapes Alert" reads "This is a special announcement for Supercollider employees only!! Your job is a test. It is only a test!! Had your job been an actual job, you would have received raises, promotions, and other signs of appreciation!! We now return you to

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your miserable state of existence."

Outside the office building, one of the lab's monstrous brown trash dumpsters has been renamed "Superconductor." The giant steel trash-paper compactor does look oddly like one of the SSC's fifty-foot-long superconducting magnets; but the point, of course, is that trash and the magnet are now roughly equivalent in worth.

The SSC project to date has cost about two billion dollars. Some $440,885,853 of that sum was spent by the State of Texas, and the Governor of the State of Texas, the volatile Ann Richards, is not at all happy about it.

The Governor's Advisory Committee on the Superconducting Super Collider held its first meeting at the SSC Laboratory in Dallas, on January 14, 1994. The basic assignment of this blue-ribbon panel of Texan scholars and politicians is to figure out how to recoup something for Texas from this massive failed investment.

Naturally I made it my business to attend, and sat in on a day's worth of presentations by such worthies as Bob White, President of the National Academy of Engineering; John Peoples, the SSC's current director; Roy Schwitters, the SSC's original Director, who resigned in anguish after the cancellation; the current, and former, Chancellors of the University of Texas System; the Governor's Chief of Staff; the Director of the Texas Office of State-Federal Relations; a pair of Texas Congressmen, and various other interested parties, including engineers, physicists, lawyers and one, other, lone journalist, from a Dallas newspaper. Forty-six people in all, counting the Advisory Committee of nine. Lunch was catered.

The mood was as dark as the fresh-drilled yet already-decaying SSC tunnels. "I hope we can make something positive out of all this," muttered US Congressman Joe Barton (R-Tex), Waxahachie's representative and a tireless champion of the original project. A Texas state lawyer told me bitterly that "the Department of Energy treats our wonderful asset like one of their hazardous waste sites!"

For his part, the DoE's official representative, a miserably unhappy flak-catcher from the Office of Energy Research, talked a lot under extensive grilling by the Committee, but said precisely nothing. "I honestly don't know how the Secretary is going to write her report," he mourned, wincing. "The policy is to close things down in as cheap a way as possible."

Nothing about the SSC can be

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cleared without the nod of the new Energy Secretary, the formidable Hazel O'Leary. At the moment, Ms. O'Leary is very busy, checking the DoE's back-files on decades of nuclear medical research on uninformed American citizens. Her representative conveyed the vague notion that Ms. O'Leary might be inclined to allow something to be done with the site of the SSC, if the State of Texas were willing to pay for everything, and if it weren't too much trouble for her agency. In the meantime she would like to cut the SSC's shutdown budget for 1994 by two-thirds, with no money at all for the SSC in 1995.

Hans Mark, former Chancellor of the University of Texas System, gamely declared that the SSC would in fact be built — someday. Despite anything Congress may say, the scientific need is still there, he told the committee — and Waxahachie is still the best site for such a project. Mr. Mark compared the canceled SSC to the "canceled" B-1 Bomber, a project that was built at last despite the best efforts of President Carter to kill it. "Five years down the road," he predicted, "or ten years." He urged the State of Texas not to sell the 16,747 acres it has purchased to house the site.

Federal engineering mandarin Bob White grimly called the cancellation "a watershed in American science," noting that never before had such a large project, of undisputed scientific worth, been simply killed outright by Congress. He noted that the physical assets of the SSC are worth essentially nothing — pennies per pound — without the trained staff, and that the staff is wasting away.

There remain some 1,983 people in the employ of the SSC (or rather in the employ of the Universities Research Association, a luckless academic bureaucracy that manages the SSC and has taken most of the political blame for the cost overruns). The dead Collider's technical staff alone numbers over a thousand people: 16 in senior management, 133 scientists, 56 applied physicists, 429 engineers, 159 computer specialists and network people, 159 guest scientists and research associates on grants from other countries and other facilities, and 191 "technical associates."

"Deadwood," scoffed one attendee, "three hundred and fifty people in physics research when we don't even have a machine!" But the truth is that without a brilliantly talented staff in place, all the one-of-a-kind cutting-edge machines at the SSC are so much junk. Many of the people who stay are staying in the

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forlorn hope of actually using some of the smaller machines they have spent years developing and building.

There have been, so far, about sixty more-or-less serious suggestions for alternate uses of the SSC, its facilities, its machineries, and its incomplete tunnel.

The SSC's Linear Accelerator was one of the smaller assets of the great machine, but it is almost finished and would be world-class anywhere else. It has been repeatedly suggested that it could be used for medical radiation treatments or for manufacturing medical isotopes. Unfortunately, the Linear Accelerator is in rural Ellis County, miles from Waxahachie and miles from any hospital, and it was designed and optimized for physics research, not for medical treatment or manufacturing.

The former "N-15" site of the Collider, despite its colorless name, is the most advanced manufacturing and testing facility in the world — when it comes to giant superconducting magnets. The N-15 magnet facility is not only well-nigh complete, but was almost entirely financed by funds from the State of Texas. Unfortunately, the only real market remaining for its "products" —brobdingnagian frozen accelerator magnets — is the European CERN accelerator.

CERN itself has been hurting for money lately, its German and Spanish government partners in particular complaining loudly about the dire expense of hunting top quarks and such.

Former SSC Director Roy Schwitters therefore declared that CERN would need SSC's valuable magnets, and that the US should use these assets as leverage for influence at CERN.

This suggestion, however, was too much for Texan Congressman Joe Barton. He described Schwitter's suggestion as "very altruistic" and pointed out that the Europeans had given the SSC "the back of their hand for eight years!"

One could only admire the moral grit of SSC's former Director in gamely proposing that the magnets, the very backbone of his dead Collider, should be shipped, for the good of science, to his triumphant European rivals. It would seem that the American particle-physics research has suffered such a blow from the collapse of the SSC that the only reasonable course of action for the American physics community is to go cap in hand to the Europeans and try, somehow, to make things up.

At least, that proposal, galling as it may be, does make some sense for

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American physicists — but for an American politician, to drop two billion dollars on the SSC just to ship its magnets to some cyclotron in Switzerland is quite another matter. When an attendee gently urged Congressman Barton to "take a longer view" — perhaps, someday, the Europeans would reciprocate the scientific favor — the Texan Congressman merely narrowed his eyes in a glare that would have scared Clint Eastwood, and vowed "I will 'reciprocate' the concern that the Europeans have shown for the SSC!"

It's been suggested that the numerous well-appointed SSC offices could become campuses of some new research institution: on magnets, or cryogenics, or controls, or computer simulation. The physics departments of many Texas colleges and universities like this idea. After all, there's a great deal of handy state-of-the-art clutter there, equipment any research lab in the world would envy. Six and a half million dollars' worth of machine tools and welding equipment. Three million in high-tech calibration equipment and measuring devices. Ten million dollars in trucks, vans, excavators, bulldozers and such. A million-dollar print shop.

And almost fifty million dollars worth of state-of-the-art computing equipment circa 1991 or so, including a massively parallel Hypercube simulator, CAD/CAM engineering and design facilities with millions of man-hours of custom software, FDDI, OSI, and videoconferencing office computer networks, and 2,600 Macintosh IIvx personal computers. Plus a two-million dollar, fully equipped physics library.

Unfortunately it's very difficult to propose a new physics facility just to make use of this, well, stuff, when there are long-established federal physics research facilities such as Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore, now going begging because nobody wants their veteran personnel to build new nuclear weapons. If anyone builds such a place in Waxahachie, then the State of Texas will have to pay for it. And Texas is not inclined to shell out more money. Texas already feels that the rest of the United States owes Texas $440,885,853 for the dead Collider.

Besides the suggestions for medical uses, magnetic and superconductive studies, and the creation of some new research institute, there are the many suggestions collectively known as "Other." One is to privatize the SSC as the "American Institute for Superconductivity Competitiveness" and ask for corporate help. Unfortunately the hottest (or maybe "coolest") research area

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in superconductivity these days is not giant helium-frozen magnets for physicists, but the new ceramic superconductors.

Other and odder schemes include a compressed-air energy-storage research facility. An earth-wobble geophysics experiment. Natural gas storage.

And, perhaps inevitably, the suggestion of Committee member Martin Goland that the SSC tunnel be made into a high-level nuclear waste-storage site. A "temporary" waste site, he assured the Committee, that would store highly radioactive nuclear waste in specially designed "totally safe" steel shipping casks, until a "permanent" site opens somewhere in New Mexico.

"I'm gonna sell my house now," stage-whispered the physicist next to me in the audience. "Waxahachie will be a ghost town!"

This was an upshot worthy of Greek myth — a tunnel built to steal the fiery secrets of the God Particle, which ends up constipated by thousands of radioactive steel coprolites, gifts from the Trojan Horse of Our Friend Mr. Atom. It's such a darkly poetic, Southern-Gothic example of hubris clobbered by nemesis that one almost wishes it would actually happen.

As far as safety goes, hiding nuclear waste in an incomplete 14.7 mile tunnel under Texas is certainly far more safe than leaving the waste where it is at the moment (basically, all over America, from sea to shining sea). DoE's nuclear-waste chickens have come back to roost in major fashion lately, as time catches up with a generation of Cold War weapons scientists. "They were never given the money they needed to do it cleanly, but just told to do it right away in the name of National Security," a federal expert remarked glumly over the ham and turkey sandwiches at the lunch break. He went on to grimly mention "huge amounts of carbon tetrachloride seeping into the water table" and radioactive waste "storage tanks that burp hydrogen."

But the Texans were having none of that; the chairman of the Committee declared that they had heard Mr. Goland's suggestion, and that it would go no further. The room erupted into nervous laughter.

The Committee's first meeting broke up with the suggestion that sixty million dollars be found somewhere-or-other to maintain an unspecified "core staff" of SSC researchers, while further study is undertaken on what to actually do with the remains.

As the head of SMU's physics department has remarked, "The general

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impression was that it would be an embarrassment or a waste or sinful to say that, after $2 billion, you get nothing, zip, zero for it." However, zip and zero may well be exactly the result, despite the best intentions of the Texan clean-up crew. The dead Collider is a political untouchable now. The Texans would like to make something from the corpse, not for its own sake, really, but just so the people of Texas will not look quite so much like total hicks and chumps. The DoE, for its part, would like this relic of nutty Reagan Republicanism to vanish into the memory hole with all appropriate speed. The result is quite likely to be a lawsuit by the State of Texas against the DoE, where yet more millions are squandered in years of wrangling by lawyers, an American priesthood whose voracious appetite for public funds puts even physicists to shame.

But perhaps "squandered" is too harsh a word for the SSC. After all, it's not as if those two billion dollars were actually spent on the subatomic level. They were spent in perfectly normal ways, and went quite legally into the pockets of standard government contractors such as Sverdrup and EG&G (facilities construction), Lockheed (systems engineering), General Dynamics, Westinghouse, and Babcock and Wilcox (magnets), Obayashi & Dillingham (tunnel contractors), and Robbins Company (Tunnel Boring Machine). The money went to architects and engineers and designers and roadpavers and people who string Ethernet cable and sell UNIX boxes and Macintoshes. Those dollars also paid the salaries of 2,000 researchers for several years. Admittedly, the nation would have been far better off if those 2,000 talented people simply had been given a million dollars each and told to go turn themselves into anything except particle physicists, but that option wasn't presented.

The easy-going town of Waxahachie seems to have few real grudges over the experience. A public meeting, called so that sufferers in Waxahachie could air their economic complaints about the dead Collider, had almost no attendees. The entire bizarre enterprise seems scarcely to have impinged at all on everyday life in Waxahachie.

Besides, not five miles from the SSC's major campus, the Waxahachians still have their "Scarborough Fair," a huge mock-medieval "English Village" where drawling "lords and ladies" down on day-trips from Dallas can watch fake jousts and drink mead in a romantic heroic-fantasy atmosphere with ten times the popular appeal of that tire-

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some hard-science nonsense.

As boondoggles go, SSC wasn't small. However, SSC wasn't anywhere near so grotesque as the multiple billions spent, both openly and covertly, on American military science funding. Many of the SSC's contractors were in fact military-industrial contractors, and it may have done them some good to find (slightly) alternate employment. The same goes for the many Russian nuclear physicists employed by the SSC, who earned useful hard currency and were spared the grim career choices in Russia's collapsing nuclear physics enterprise. It has been a cause of some concern lately that Russian nuclear physicists may, as Lederman and Glashow once put it, "go on to play vital roles in the rest of the world" — i.e., in the nuclear enterprises of Libya, North Korea, Syria and Iraq. It's a pity those Russians can't be put to work salting the tails of quarks inside the SSC; though a cynic might say it's a greater pity that they were ever taught physics in the first place.

Science magazine, in its editorial post-mortem "The Lessons of the Super Collider," had its own morals to draw. Lesson One: "High energy physics has become too expensive to be defined by national boundaries." Lesson Two: "Just because particle physics asks questions about the fundamental structure of matter does not give it any greater claim on taxpayer dollars than solid-state physics or molecular biology. Proponents of any project must justify the costs in relation to the scientific and social return."

That may indeed be the New Reality for American science funding today, but it was never the justification of the Machine in the Desert. The Machine in the Desert was an absolute vision, about the absolute need to know.

And it was about pride. "Pride," wrote Lederman and Glashow in 1985, "is one of the seven deadly sins," yet they nevertheless declared their pride in the successes of their predecessors, and their unbounded determination to make America not merely the best in particle physics, but the best in everything, as America had been when they were children.

In his own 1993 post-mortem on the dead Collider, written for the New York Times, Lederman raised the rhetorical question, "Is the real problem the hubris of physicists to believe that society would continue to support this exploration no matter what the cost?" A rhetorical question because Lederman, having raised that cogent question, never bothered to address it. Instead, he ended his

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column by blaming the always-convenient spectre of American public ignorance of science. "Most important of all," he concluded, "scientists must rededicate themselves to a massive effort at raising the science literacy of the general public. Only when the citizens have a reasonable science savvy will their congressional servants vote correctly."

Alas, many of our congressional servants already possess plenty of science savvy; what they have, is science savvy to their own ends. Not science for the sake of Galileo, Newton, Maxwell, Einstein or Leon Lederman, but science for the sake of the devil's bargain American science has made with its political sponsors: knowledge as power.

As for the supposedly ignorant general public, the American public were far more generous with scientists when scientists were very few in number, and regarded with a proper superstitious awe by a mainly agricultural and blue-collar populace. The more they come to understand science, the less respect the American general public has for the whims of its practitioners. Americans may not do a lot of calculus, but most American voters are "knowledge workers" of one sort or another nowadays, and they've seen Carl Sagan on TV often enough to know that, even though Carl's a nice guy, billions of stars and zillions of quarks won't put bread on their tables. Raising the general science literacy of the American public is probably a self-defeating effort when it comes to monster projects like the SSC. Teaching more American kids more math and science will only increase the already vast armies of scientists and federally funded researchers, drastically shrinking the pool of available funds tomorrow.

It's an open question whether a 40TeV collider like the SSC will ever be built, by anyone, anywhere, ever. The Europeans, in their low-key, suave, yet subtly menacing fashion, seem confident that they can snag the Higgs scalar boson with their upgraded CERN collider at a mere tenth of the cost of Reagan's SSC. If so, corks will pop in Zurich and there will be gnashing of teeth in Brookhaven and Berkeley. American scientific competitors will taste some of the agony of intellectual defeat in the realm of physics that European scientists have been swallowing yearly since 1945. That won't mean the end of the world.

On the other hand, the collapse of SSC may well suck CERN down in the backdraft. It may be that the global prestige of particle physics has now collapsed so utterly that European governments

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will also stop signing the checks, and CERN itself will fail to build its upgrade.

Or even if they do build it, they may be simply unlucky, and at 10 TeV the CERN people may get little to show.

In which case, it may be that the entire pursuit of particle physics, stymied by energy limits, will simply go out of intellectual fashion. If the global revulsion against both nuclear weapons and nuclear power increases and intensifies, it is not beyond imagination to imagine nuclear research simply dwindling away entirely. The whole kit-and-caboodle of pions, mesons, gluinos, antineutrinos, that whole strange charm of quarkiness, may come to seem a very twentieth-century enthusiasm. Something like the medieval scholastic enthusiasm for numbering the angels that can dance on the head of a pin. Nowadays that's a byword for a silly waste of intellectual effort, but in medieval times that was actually the pretty much the same basic inquiry as modern particle physics: a question about the absolute limits of space and material being.

Or the SSC may never be built for entirely different reasons. It may be that accelerating particles in the next century will not require the massive Rube Goldberg apparatus of a fifty-four-mile tunnel and the twelve cryogenic plants with their entire tank farms of liquid helium. It is a bit hard to believe that scientific questions as basic as the primal structure of matter will be abandoned entirely, but there is more than one way to boost a particle. Giant *room-temperature* superconductors really would transform the industrial base, and they might make quarks jump hoops without the macho necessity of being "super" at all.

In the end, it is hard to wax wroth at the dead Collider, its authors, or those who pulled the plug. The SSC was both sleazy and noble: at one level a "quark-barrel" commercialized morass of contractors wallowing at the federal trough, while Congressmen eye-gouged one another in the cloakroom, scientists angled for the main chance and a steady paycheck, and supposedly dignified scholars ground their teeth in public and backbit like a bunch of jealous prima donnas. And yet at the same time, the SSC really was a Great Enterprise, a scheme to gladden the heart of Democritus and Newton and Tycho Brahe, and all those other guys who had no real job or a fat state sinecure.

The Machine in the Desert was a transcendant scheme to steal cosmic secrets, an enterprise whose

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unashamed raison d'être was to enable wild and glorious flights of imagination and comprehension. It was sense-of-wonder and utter sleaze at one and the same time. Rather like science fiction, actually. Not that the SSC itself was science fictional, although it certainly was (and is). I mean, rather, that the SSC was very like the actual writing and publishing of science fiction, an enterprise where bright but surprisingly naive people smash galaxies for seven cents a word and a chance at a plastic brick.

It would take a hard-hearted science fiction writer indeed to stand at the massive lip of that 240-foot hole in the ground at N15 — as I did late one evening in January, with the sun at my back and tons of hardware gently rusting all around me and not a human being in sight — and not feel a deep sense of wonder and pity.

In another of his determined attempts to enlighten the ignorant public, in his book *The God Particle*, Leon Lederman may have said it best.

In a parody of the Bible called "The Very New Testament," he wrote:

"And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Waxahachie, and they dwelt there. And they said to one another, Go to, let us build a Giant Collider, whose collisions may reach back to the beginning of time. And they had superconducting magnets for bending, and protons had they for smashing.

"And the Lord came down to see the accelerator, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold the people are unconfounding my confounding. And the Lord sighed and said, Go to, let us go down, and there give them the God Particle so that they may see how beautiful is the universe I have made."

A man who justifies his own dreams in terms of frustrating God and rebuilding the Tower of Babel — only this time in Texas, and this time done right — has got to be utterly tone-deaf to his own intellectual arrogance. Worse yet, the Biblical parody is openly blasphemous, unnecessarily alienating a large section of Lederman's potential audience of American voters. Small wonder that the scheme came to grief — great wonder, in fact, that Lederman's Babel came anywhere as near to success as it did.

Nevertheless, I rather like the sound of that rhetoric; I admire its sheer cosmic chutzpah. I scarcely see what real harm has been done. (Especially compared to the harm attendant on the works of Lederman's colleagues such as Oppenheimer and Sakharov.) It's true that a man was

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crushed to death building the SSC, but he was a miner by profession, and mining is very hazardous work under any circumstances. Two billion dollars was, it's true, almost entirely wasted, but governments always waste money, and after all, it was only money.

Give it a decade or two, to erase the extreme humiliation naturally and healthfully attendant on this utter scientific debacle. Then, if the United States manages to work its way free of its fantastic burden of fiscal irresponsibility without destroying the entire global economy in the process, I, for one, as an American and Texan citizen, despite everything, would be perfectly happy to see the next generation of particle physicists voted another three billion dollars, and told to get digging again.

Or even four billion dollars.

Okay, maybe five billion tops; but that's my final offer.

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Ray Vukcevich's first story in F&SF, *"Mom's Little Friends" (April, 1992), will reappear in* The Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction, *to be published by St. Martin's Press in October. He has since sold us several other stories, of which "No Comet" is the first.*

His short fiction has appeared in Aboriginal SF, Amazing Stories, Asimov's, Pulphouse, *and other magazines. He is a research assistant for the Institute of Cognitive and Decision Sciences at the University of Oregon, and is currently working on a novel.*

No Comet

By Ray Vukcevich

CONVINCED THAT MY SLANT on Bohr's version of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics was our last hope, I bullied Jane, who didn't want to be married to me anymore, and Sacha into cooperating with a final desperate attempt to save the world.

"This is stupid, Tim," Jane said, her voice softened a little by the brown paper bag over her head.

"La la, la la, la la," Sacha sang. She banged the heels of her shoes against the legs of her chair in time to her tune. Wearing a bag over her head was still fun, I thought, but our daughter was seven and had fidgeting down to a fine art. How long would she stick with me?

I'd pushed away my plate, but there was a sticky spot, orange marmalade probably, where I would have liked to put my hands. I put them in my lap instead. Breakfast had been tense. Jane had banged some pots around, scorched some eggs, burned some toast, warmed some bacon. I wished I'd brushed my teeth before I put a bag over my own head.

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Everything was tan, but not an even tan; I imagined it was like looking through the dry, mottled skin of some desert creature, maybe a horned toad. There was a seam where the brown paper overlapped and joined to make a bag, and I couldn't see much light through that double layer. If I tilted my head back carefully, I could see what looked like the letter H in some fancy font (except for the way the seam came up and touched the cross piece of the H) made from the overlaps needed to square off and seal the bottom of the bag.

"I don't think I could have missed the fact that a comet is about to hit the Earth, Tim," Jane said.

"Do you read the newspapers?"

"No."

"Do you watch TV?"

"You know I don't."

"How about the radio?"

"Well, no. Not today."

"None of your goofy friends do either." I nailed down my point. "So just how do you think you would have heard about it?"

"That tone is exactly why I say we need to live apart, Tim."

"Boop boop boop be doop," Sacha sang.

"Everyone just relax," I said. "And keep your bags on." Things were slipping away. I needed to circle our wagons. It was vital that none of us give the world outside even a fleeting glance.

My own breath aside, the smell inside my bag reminded me of all the things you can carry in a brown paper bag. Curiously, the first thing that came to mind was books. Surely, I'd carried home more groceries in brown paper bags than books. In fact the name of the grocery store was printed right on the bag in red letters. Nevertheless, I thought of books, and clothes, and moving. I thought of garbage in the bags before I thought of groceries. Maybe it was because groceries spend so little time in the bags. I knew that if I packed my stuff up in paper bags, the bags might just sit for months in some cold new place.

"This isn't just my plan, Jane," I said. "The president has been on TV urging people not to look. Forests have been lighted to smoke up the skies. Teams are everywhere in primitive areas making sure no one looks."

"Even if there is a giant comet about to hit the Earth, just what good do you expect these bags to do?" Jane asked.

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"Things that might happen can't be separated from the devices you use to measure them," I said. "You can't look at something without changing it."

"What?"

"The moon's not there if no one is looking. Or in our case, the comet."

"Like the tree in the forest?"

"Sort of," I said. "But that was philosophy. This is science."

"Oh, right. Sure."

"I have to go to the bathroom," Sacha said.

"Soon, Honey," I said. "Just hang on a little while longer."

"Someone would peek," Jane said.

"Maybe. But it won't be us."

"How can that matter?"

"This is the same argument you use for not voting, Jane." I knew I should be soothing her instead of snapping at her, but I couldn't help it. "It's irresponsible. If everyone thought like you, no one would vote."

"Who's talking about voting? We're sitting around the kitchen table with grocery sacks over our heads!"

Sacha giggled.

I decided to try silence on Jane. I could hear my own breathing against the sides of the bag, and with any little movement there was a rustle like dry autumn leaves in a green plastic trash sack. I could hear birds, too. They would be in the feeder outside the window over the sink. They would fly away if they caught us looking at them. I could pull the bag away from my face a little and look straight down and see my white shirt over the gut hanging into my lap. I could suck the gut in; I could sigh it out. I could see my tan slacks, my black loafers, and the black and white kitchen tiles.

Strange, but I couldn't see the name of our grocery store through the bag. Had I put the bag on backwards? I twisted it around. I still couldn't see the letters, and then I didn't know which way the bag was. Were the red letters to the front or to the back? I felt unhooked, disoriented, lost.

Things suddenly got brighter. It is my opinion that that was when the comet touched the atmosphere, and because it didn't hit just then, I think the last person on Earth quit looking at it at precisely that moment.

"Don't you see the sudden light of the fire?"

"A cloud probably just moved away from the sun," Jane said.

I thought I heard some uncertainty in her voice. "That's what you'd

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like to think," I said.

"How long are we going to play this game, Tim?"

How long? Why, just until the comet's gone, I almost said. It hit me then that Jane's question was a good one. If finally no one was looking at the comet, did that mean it went away, or did it mean the comet was hanging frozen just inside the atmosphere, filling the entire sky, ready to plunge down on us as soon as we looked? Didn't that mean we could never look? Didn't that mean we were doomed to sit there at the kitchen table with bags over our heads forever?

"It makes no sense," Jane said. "What about intelligences on other planets? What if some alien shaman is looking at your comet through a telescope?"

"One of your saucer people?"

"At least there's good evidence for them. Unlike your stupid comet."

"Jane," I said, "if you looked out the window right now you'd see the sky filled with fire, and just because you looked, the comet would crash down and blow us all up."

"You're scaring me, Daddy," Sacha said.

"Don't worry, Honey." I would have liked to touch her hand, but I couldn't reach her. "Nothing can hurt you if you keep your head in the bag."

"You're teaching her to be an ostrich!"

"What's an ostrich?" Sacha asked.

"Is that why you won't let me have the weekends?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I really, really have to go, Daddy," Sacha said.

I heard them shifting in their chairs, moving around, trying to be quiet, but not succeeding. I heard them whispering. Fear turned me to stone. The game was up. I pictured Jane quietly slipping off her bag and setting it aside, pictured her carefully removing Sacha's bag, saw Jane grin and roll her eyes in my direction and put her finger to her lips so Sacha would be quiet, saw them both looking at me stiff in my bag, the two of them, the little alien, the Russian girl, our surprising blond Sacha, and the big one, looking so sweetly sad suddenly, Jane. It wasn't that she hated me, I realized. She'd moved on when I wasn't looking. She was bored, restless; we had so little in common these days. She wandered like a wounded bird, one leg missing maybe, circling east, and I plodded ever westward. What in the world did we have

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to talk about?

I saw Sacha make an O of her mouth when she looked at the window and saw the comet peeking in at us like an angry red eye filling the sky. I saw the comet leap to Earth and fire the trees, the city, our house. Burning hurricane winds knocked down our walls and crisped our skin and peeled our bones.

I cried out.

Jane snatched the bag from my head.

Sunshine turned the refrigerator into a gleaming white block, an alien monolith that had popped into existence among our chrome pots and wooden bowls. From somewhere far away came the tiny tinkle tinkle of an ice-cream truck. I looked at the window over the sink, and, in a flutter of squawks and black wings, birds fled the feeder.

"It's easy to see what happened," I said. "You were right, Jane. Someone peeked. But we didn't. And because we didn't, by the time we looked, we'd split off into a reality in which the comet never existed in the first place. We're saved!"

"Oh, Daddy." Sacha hugged me quickly, then ran off to the bathroom.

"Okay," Jane said, "you can have every other weekend. But we take the cat."

"What cat?" I asked.

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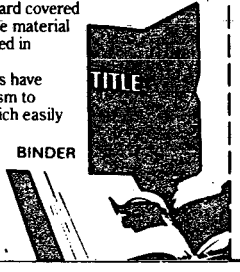

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Madeleine Robins has sold six novels, the most recent being City of Fire *to Tor Books. In addition to her stories in* F&SF, *her short fiction has appeared in* Asimov's. *Her short story, "Willie," our December 1992 cover story, will be featured in* The Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction *from St. Martin's Press.*

"Somewhere in Dreamland" was originally commissioned for Coney Island Wonder Stories, *edited by* F&SF's *own Bob Howe and Pocket Books editor John Ordover. Wildside Press will publish the anthology later this year.*

Somewhere in Dreamland Tonight

By Madeleine E. Robins

THE DRESS, WHEN SHE FINDS it, is pink. It smells richly of lavender, slightly of camphor, an uneasy mixture in the stifling heat of the attic. Ruth sits back on her heels and holds the thing out before her wonderingly. From the style, it would be from before she was married, when she was still living with Aunt Min; the summer she was wild, going out to Coney on the weekends with that girl from her office. She imagines herself in the dress, poised before a mirror.

A door slams downstairs. Peg, on her way out to God knows where. On the surface of the cloth Ruth sees the argument an hour before, her daughter standing in the attic doorway shouting that she is old enough to run her own life. "I bring home my pay, don't I? I'm entitled to a little fun. You just don't know the way things *are.*" Sees herself, all the love and worry she feels turning to hard little words in her mouth when she tries to caution her only child, her baby. The headache that began an hour ago dances hotly behind Ruth's eyes. Her eyes and throat itch.

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Ruth shakes the dress out brusquely. Why did I keep it, she wonders. There is yellowed lace at the collar; on one side there is a small brown stain, almost invisible. When she looks at the dress Ruth feels a frisson of fear and something she almost doesn't recognize: a sudden unnerving sexual pang. That was the summer that...she begins, then cannot finish the thought. Memories of that summer are immediate, but something eludes her. Did something happen? She tries hard, going beyond the heat and dust in the attic, beyond the pain that makes her vision jump with each pulse; Ruth knows the dress means something, but cannot recall what.

The summer when she was wild, she calls it in her memory. *But what we thought was wicked then.... I always went home with — what was her name? Leda McHale — back to Leda's to sleep on the trundle in Leda's own bedroom, as chaste as a nun.* I should go downstairs now, she thinks. But downstairs will be empty of Peg, gone off to a football party at college with one of those boys. Downstairs will be full of Peg's discarded stockings and teddies, the purple cloche hanging off the newel post, the scent of Peg's too strong, too suggestive perfume. Peg doesn't understand, doesn't know what she's doing, how dangerous it is to tempt those boys. She's too young — what's eighteen years? *She* doesn't know how men can be. Ruth knows.

The dress, when she found it, was pink. It hung in the window of Hooley's Dry Goods and Ladies' Furnishings and cost Ruth almost a week's wage from her job as a type-writer. The bodice draped to a short waist, the sleeves teardrop-shaped with lace at the wrists; the collar was ivory lace and rose high, high on the throat, to just under her chin. In it Ruth, with her soft, rounded chin and strawberry blonde hair, looked like an illustration from the *Home Journal.* The mirror and the salesgirl both told her so. She bought it knowing that Aunt Min would purse her lips at the price.

On Saturday, early, she donned the dress, pinned her hair up under a small, flirtatious straw hat, and told Aunt Min she was going on a picnic with a friend from the 17th Street Methodist Church choir. Then Ruth was gone, gone to meet her best friend Leda, Leda's brother Jonah, and Jonah's fiancée Pearline, to catch the train to Coney.

Going to Coney. It was forbidden fruit; Aunt Min read the *Police Gazette* with as much fervor as her Bible, and knew chapter and verse about the vice and depravity practiced at Coney: men and women clinging to each other on

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the great wheel, five-cent beers, freak shows. If Min had known where Ruth really intended to spend the day she would have locked her in her room and read temperance lectures to her through the keyhole.

The train ride felt endless. In the heat Ruth's hair began to come down in rosy wisps, sticking to her cheeks and neck. She dabbed ineffectively at the beads of perspiration on upper lip and brow with a handkerchief, stealing a glance at the other women in the car. All of them were flushed and moist, languorous in the heat. Leda and Pearline giggled and poked at each other and at Ruth; Jonah slept through their mirth with his boater drawn down over his eyes, the tips of his waxed mustache gleaming in the sunlight.

When they got off the train it was all spread before them. Steeplechase and Dreamland, Luna Park, the grand old resort hotels down the coast, the Boardwalk. Revitalized by the freshening breeze from the water, Leda and Ruth immediately wanted to run ahead. But Pearline wanted a lemonade, and to sit in the shade with Jonah. So Ruth and Leda sipped lemonade and tried not to listen while Jonah and Pearline whispered to each other on their side of the table. Ruth was astonished at their shamelessness, but no one else seemed to notice or care. Leda caught a man staring at her, and when she frowned he tipped his hat and smiled, and Leda giggled nervously into Ruth's shoulder. At last, with lemonade still sticky on their lips, they left the stand for the parks; Ruth looked back over her shoulder to make sure the man had not followed after them.

For hours they rode the rides, squealing at every bump and whirl and breathtaking turn. Pearline nestled against Jonah, shrieking until he tightened the arm that circled her waist; Leda and Ruth clung to each other in delicious terror. Under the grinning supervision of Tilyou's great clown they gorged themselves on up and down and sideways motion. Then they went down Surf Avenue to Luna Park to watch the Great Naval Spectacular, arguing which park was the best. Leda and Jonah liked Steeplechase; Pearline preferred Luna's uplifting spectacles. Then, at dusk, they came to Dreamland, and Ruth knew which park was her favorite.

The clock downstairs strikes five o'clock. Ruth starts, looks up, remembers that Peg is gone and that Peg's father won't be home from the lodge until late. She has the house to herself tonight, big and empty.

They have done well, they own the house outright, even have a broker

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and stocks; Peg went to a good school for young ladies across town, and Ruth has a girl in three times a week to help with the house and do the heavy cleaning. It is more than she ever dreamed of, growing up in Brooklyn. The house is big, the girl won't come again until Monday, Peg has gone out against Ruth's wishes, traveling with that fast crowd, college boys. Ruth can smell the danger of them when they come to the house. Why can't Peg understand? What is it that drives her out to parties, sends her home after midnight with gin breath unsuccessfully disguised with peppermints? But even as Ruth thinks "I never..." the dress in her hands belies the thought. She can remember the thrill of sneaking out, doing the forbidden, going to the forbidden place. More: when she looks at the collar she remembers the way it circled her throat so that her chin nestled in a ruffle of lace. Remembers tilting her head until it was cupped by the lace as if it were a firm, cool hand. Remembers the hand tracing a path from her ear down along her throat, slowly and caressingly. Abruptly she looks away.

The dress, when she found it, was pink, jumbled in the corner with half a dozen other garments, its soft fabric creased and dotted with greasy spots, a clump of dust clinging to the fold of the bodice. On the high lace collar, so tiny one could miss it, a stain in the shape of a perfect droplet, rusty red. Ruth shook her head, trying to remember what it meant. It was hot in her room, stifling, and the sunlight brought on a headache as she looked at the dress. Something.... Aunt Min bustled in to borrow a pair of gloves for church and saw Ruth's headache written clearly across her face. Then it was a matter of cool compresses, Aunt Min's assurances that the Almighty would excuse her missing Sunday services this once. Min herself drew the shades and dabbed at Ruth's temples with lavender water until Ruth wanted to scream. Finally she went off to church, the feather in her hat standing righteously erect.

The dress still hung over the back of her wicker armchair. As she stared at it a whisper threaded Ruth's memory: *rose pink lady.* Who called her that? With each glance at the dress the sense that she should remember was fainter, less imperative. At last she got up and hung the dress in her clothes press and lay down to wait out the headache.

When she awoke it was dusk, and the week stretched before her like a quiet road at twilight.

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The world went away when you entered Dreamland and there was nothing but light and music and people everywhere. They went first to the Venetian Canals, where Pearline and Jonah rode the gondola, heads close together with the boatman's uninterested chaperonage. Then Leda wanted to see the midgets; Pearline wanted to see Creation. Ruth didn't care: everything was fine with her in Dreamland.

As they walked along they were hailed by the barker from the Congress of Living Wonders. Jonah shook his head and pulled Pearline after him. Leda followed. Behind them, Ruth looked over at the platform for a moment. She was about to turn away when she saw a man looking at her. She blinked and he tipped his hat and smiled. He must mean some other girl, she thought. But she hung back, delighted and appalled to realize that he *was* looking at her. Of all the women in the crowd he chose her to smile on. In the swirl and eddy of the crowd Ruth stood rock still, looking at him. What does he want? she wondered, and answered herself: he wanted *something*. That was what Aunt Min would say. Men always wanted some unimaginable something. For the first time in her life Ruth wondered, seriously wondered, what the something was.

He stood a few feet behind the barker, near the curtain at the back of the platform. He didn't seem to have a part in the show; he was simply observing. Ruth was so fascinated by the dark sparkle of the man and the flush of excitement that made her blush, that she didn't see Leda and Jonah and Pearline continuing on to the Creation pavilion, pushing through the crowd as oblivious to her loss as she was to their absence.

He was dark and polished, like an onyx pebble. His pearl gray suit was fresh despite the heat, his tie and collar crisp at his throat. His eyes were dark as onyx and his smile had a cool, white light all its own. From the platform the barker spoke insinuatingly, drawing the crowd in to see the Bearded Lady, the Man with Two Mouths. As she pushed forward with them, searching for a coin in her pocketbook, a hand at her elbow stopped her. He was there beside her, the onyx-dark man, saying, "Keep your money, darling. It will be my pleasure."

Blushing, Ruth let him guide her into the show. Light from the incandescents flooded the area unevenly, leaving dark pockets between the exhibits; they gave a low sizzling noise which blended into the calls and sighs and shrieks of the crowd and the performers. They paced leisurely from one

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platform to the next as the barker's feverish baritone extolled the strangeness of this one, the awfulness of that. Ruth listened with half an ear, distracted by the presence of the onyx man at her side. His light touch on her elbow that kept her constantly aware of things she had never known existed: heat and scent and male presence.

They strolled past the freaks and wonders and Ruth accepted each of them without question because they were dressed in his glamor. He murmured softly into her ear until she giggled nervously at his comments about the fat lady's beard and the sword-swallower's wrinkled tights. His breath was hot in her ear, moving the strands of her red hair against her cheek. When they came to the show's end and the barker exhorted the audience to Come Again, Come Again, Ladeees and Gentle-men, the stranger leaned close. "Rose-pink lady," he murmured. "Will you take a walk with me?"

Then they parted from the audience and left the hall by a doorway in the rear, their passage noted by the barker with a knowing glance. Her onyx-dark man led her through an alley and out into the main street, and they sauntered like any other summer beaux in the crowded lamplight. A sudden turn just past the Hellgate, down an alley, and then he brought Ruth through a door and into a dusty vaulted room. It was dim after the glare of the street; Ruth blinked owlishly. She could make out wooden struts and draped canvas. There was a strong smell of paint and varnish and moldy sawdust. Ruth turned toward the man only to find him there beside her, very close. He traced the bow of her upper lip with one long finger, a gesture which shocked Ruth and moved her in a way she could not understand. When she closed her eyes she could feel his breath on her ear again. Inside her something like Aunt Min's voice told her to run for her life.

"Rose-pink lady," he murmured again.

Ruth didn't move, except to tilt her face up to his.

Leda was waiting for her at the Beacon Tower.

"Where've you been?" she fluttered. "Jo and Pearlie are looking for you everywhere, we thought you were lost. Ruthie, you all right?"

Ruth smiled and nodded and said she'd just lost them in the crowd. "Did you see the midgets?" she asked.

Leda shook her head. They had been searching for Ruth. Jonah was fit to be tied.

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"We'll have to come out again," Ruth said softly. "There is so much to see yet."

Then Jonah and Pearline found them. Ruth endured their scolding all the way to the train station, and until they boarded the car back to Flatbush Avenue. She slept on the trip back, stumbled into Aunt Min's flat, got herself to bed somehow. Already she was thinking of next Saturday.

THE NEXT time it was all familiar: the parks, the paths that connected from one to the other. The excitement that traced pathways along the nerves when you first stood there at dusk surrounded by the lights and the smells and the sounds and the tastes and the people. When they reached Dreamland Jonah took Pearline and Leda off to the midget city and they agreed to meet at the tower at nine. Ruth had told them she was meeting a friend from her church choir. Jonah may have believed her; Pearline and Leda winked broadly and took him away before he could ask too many questions. Helping Ruth, each girl borrowed a little of her adventure, thrilled to their own illicit part in her drama.

From the gates of the park it took Ruth only a few minutes to find the Congress of Wonders. By the curtains at the back of the platform she saw him, dark and polished. His smile gleamed in the dusk, and Ruth's pulse began a slow, dramatic hammering. He knew she had come to find him, she knew he knew. Everything would move forward now from that knowledge.

He took her elbow and guided her forward, smiling solicitously.

"I don't know your name," she heard herself say. His eyes were very dark.

"Adam," he said quietly.

This time he did not take her to the backstage of Hellgate. Instead they walked a thread through canvas tunnels, alleys, under the boardwalk and out onto the beach. The ocean, overshadowed by the parks, glistened in the moonlight. He held Ruth's fingers in his own cool, dry hand. After a while they took their shoes and socks off and walked with the sand between their toes. They talked, then were silent.

When she met the others at the Beacon Tower later she walked slowly, as if her blood had taken on the rhythm of the sea. On the long train ride back to Flatbush Avenue Ruth's hand floated at her chin and

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caressed the lace collar of her dress.

That night she slept at Leda's. Her dreams were full of darkness and rhythm, the touch of his hand, of his lips.

What is it about the college, about those boys that Peg finds so attractive? Ruth frowns in the dimness of the attic. *I should turn the electric on,* she thinks, but doesn't get up to flip the light switch. Those boys, most of them cheap, stupid. They have raccoon coats and cheap Ford autos and Peg thinks they're exciting. She'll waste herself on one of those boys, break her heart. None of them will stay with her, marry her, take care of her. She needs a nice, safe man like her father. She doesn't understand what I want to spare her.

Under her hands, which clench and twist, the fabric of the dress tears slightly, releasing more lavender scent on the air. *The summer I went to Coney,* she thinks. *Over and over, every Saturday all summer long, with Aunt Min wondering and worrying and silent as a stone, just looking down her nose on Sunday mornings when I came home from Leda's.* She stares at the dress in her hands and slowly smooths the creases away.

During the week Ruth was quiet and thoughtful. She did her work quietly, didn't spend much time talking to the other girls in the office. She browsed the shops looking at dresses, but she had a superstitious feeling about wearing any other dress than the pink one out to Coney. She went to choir rehearsal on Tuesday nights and helped with Aunt Min's Friday socials, pouring out weak tea for hours without protest. She carried her secret like an amulet against boredom and frustration; it took so little to recall the feelings of Coney, the looseness and languor, the hot urgent pressing of his lips against her throat. On Saturday mornings she woke up, really awake, and dressed in the pink dress again, and went to meet Leda and the others for the ride out to Coney.

After a few weeks, Leda suggested they go somewhere else on Saturday. To the country for a picnic, to the city for a show. Ruth smiled and said perhaps, but each Saturday they went to Coney. Pearline saw her fill and more of the miracle babies and Jonah watched the end of Pompeii until he was sick of it, but as long as they could sit in a gondola or on a wooden horse, pressed together, they were willing to go out to Coney again. Leda looked out for young men looking at her, but none did, no matter how she giggled and

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flirted her eyebrows. As the summer went on Leda giggled less. Ruth didn't share her adventure with Leda, forgot to ask if Leda had any beaux or flirtations. Leda, who had always been the forward, kittenish one, began to look confused and hurt. Ruth did not notice.

August turned chilly for a few days, Aunt Min took her mantle from the back of the closet to wear for church, and Ruth took to carrying a shawl with her. On a Wednesday at the office, Leda told Ruth that she and Jonah had a christening to go to that weekend. "We'll have to go to Coney next week," she said, not bothering to hide her satisfaction.

Ruth panicked.

She went through the day thinking, *how can I go out there?* For a moment she thought, *maybe Pearlie will go with me.* But Pearline would probably go to the christening. Even if she didn't Pearline would never allow herself to be abandoned at Dreamland while Ruth went off on her own. As she transcribed pages of manuscript on the typewriter her mind was at Coney with him. How could she get out to Coney? She even thought, *perhaps Aunt Min?* No, not until Hell froze over, maybe not even then. The more she thought, the more it seemed that she would really die if she couldn't get out to Dreamland on Saturday. Her thought was rattled by the pounding of the typewriter under her fingers. After a while even Saturday seemed too far off. What would he think when she didn't come? Would he forgive her? Would he smile on someone else? Ruth imagined his beautiful smile for someone else. She had to tell him she wasn't coming, that it wasn't her fault or her idea. All afternoon the feeling grew strong, so that fear fed more fear, and she couldn't stand it that she wouldn't see him *tonight*, tell him everything, how Leda and Jonah and Pearline and Aunt Min were trying to keep them apart.

At six o'clock she left the office with the other girls, Ruth turned left instead of right. Leda, waiting for her a few steps away, called after her.

"Ruthie, whererya going?"

Without turning Ruth called back, "You know where I'm going."

What happened that summer?

The thought catches Ruth by surprise. What is happening to Peg right now, that's more important than what happened twenty years ago on a beach miles away. The answers seem intertwined to her, they stand on each other's shoulders, if she can answer the one she'll know the other. *Why did I keep*

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this dress? The answer comes: *to remind me.*

Of what?

The train wasn't full, but there were still people, even families going out. Ruth felt they were looking at her, all alone with no friend, no chaperone. She pulled her shawl tighter around her and clutched her pocketbook in her lap. What would she say to him? At the sight of him she knew her doubts would melt away. Everything would be all right when she saw him. She twirled a strand of hair around her finger and stared out the window toward the nearing glow of Coney's lights.

When she got off the train it was all familiar but different. Fewer people, fewer families. More young men lounging on the benches, eyeing her, calling out Hello, Sweetheart and Looking for Me, Girlie? Even inside the gates of Dreamland everything felt subtly wrong, the music too sharp, the lights too bright, the laughter too coarse and familiar. For the first time Dreamland was not an enchanted village but a playground, loud and vulgar. She thought, it's not a dream, it's a nightmare.

He wasn't at the Congress of Wonders. The barker saw her, all right: tipped his bowler and smirked, and then pursed his lips in a soundless whistle as if he knew something she didn't. She began to push her way through the crowd into the freak show; the barker didn't try to stop her, no one demanded money. She just pushed in and pushed through, ignoring the freaks, looking for a dark head, a white smile. When she came out the exit she pushed on to Hellgate. All the places he had taken her, the backstage areas, the cul-de-sacs between rides and exhibitions, even the shadowy path under the Boardwalk were hard to find, although she had thought she knew them.

When she reached the beach at last she was exhausted and bedraggled. The hem of her brown twill skirt was soggy and stained, and her white shirtwaist was creased and dirty. She held her hat in one hand; it had come off when she climbed under the stanchions of the Boardwalk. *Where are you,* she prayed. *Please find me, please.*

In the moonlight the ocean looked like a flat, tranquil mirror. A hundred feet away she saw him, gray and silver in the moonlight, his back to her, looking out at the ocean. Ruth gasped in relief and began to cross the sand. He turned at the sound and she saw: there was a girl in his arms, pale and fair, her face turned up to his. What was worse, Adam's face when he saw Ruth

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was perfectly blank, as if he didn't know her at all. No fear, no explanation, no surprise. He was smooth and implacable as an onyx pebble.

Ruth turned and ran.

They found her at the Beacon Tower, waiting for them. When Jonah put his coat around her shoulders and Leda took her hand to lead her out of Dreamland, Ruth smiled and cried, as if she was too grateful to them ever to stop smiling, and too miserable ever to stop crying. She cried like a child, and felt like a child, pathetic, small and weary. When they got her on the train she slept all the way back, waking fitfully to clutch at Leda and weep again.

They brought Ruth home that night over her protests. Aunt Min's icy disapproval vanished when she saw her niece's gray, miserable face. Leda and Min put her to bed with a hot water bottle and a cool compress, and Ruth fell back into her restless sleep. Her dreams were full of darkness and rhythm, of pulses and heartbeat, the touch of Adam's white hands on her, the weight of his body leaning in to her; she dreamt of his breath cool in her ear, loosing a hot churning excitement in her belly and between her legs. His lips, tracing a path from her ear to her throat. His teeth, nipping gently, then piercing. Their cries, together, as he took from her and she gave, yielding everything up to him. His teeth at her throat, piercing neatly, releasing a flood of liquid heat through her arteries. It was everything she had heard of love: he told her it would only hurt once and then only pleasure, only joy.

The same joy she had seen him giving another girl in the shadows cast by the lights of Dreamland, the blood a black smear across his lips.

She woke early the next morning. The sunlight was white on the counterpane, unavoidable. Carefully folded on the chair by her wardrobe was the pink dress. For a moment on waking, Ruth remembered it all, everything. Then, as if it were blood seeping from an unseen wound, the memory began to leach out of her. Finally her recollection of Coney, of the whole summer, was as white and stainless as a bone.

When fall came Aunt Min packed the summer clothes away with lavender, as if to pack it all away. She never asked Ruth about what had happened that night, but it took weeks for the grim, suspicious look to fade entirely from her eyes. In the spring, sorting through the clothes, Ruth saw the pink dress, shook her head, put it back in the trunk. Not a style that wore well.

That winter, in December of '09, she met Peg's father. Dreamland

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burned down in '11 and all that was left were the Coney Island waltzes she danced at her wedding: "I'll see you somewhere in Dreamland, somewhere in Dreamland, tonight...." Ruth became a wife, then a mother. The Great War came and went. She had a home, a family, a good life. If it was not an exciting life, that was all right. The past shimmered in her mind as elusively as the lights of Coney Island and were lost in the safe, sunlit now.

A CRASH FROM downstairs. Startled from her reverie, alarmed by the series of thuds and crashes that are Peg making her way up the stairs, crying out wordlessly for her mother's attention, Ruth hurriedly bundles the dress up and shoves it back in the chest. She blinks in the light of the upstairs hall and closes the attic door behind her.

"Peggy?" she calls down urgently. A slurring voice answers, tells her to go away. Ruth follows the voice to the bathroom, where Peg is angrily scrubbing at her collar.

"Don't start with me, Ma." Peg refuses to meet her eye, stares resolutely at the mirror as she pokes angrily at a red stain on her collar.

Ruth stands for a moment, transfixed, the bottom dropping out of the world, everything, everything coming back to her in a flooding rush of memory. "What happened, baby?" she asks like a prayer. Trembling, she brushes Peg's hair back, away from her face and away from her throat; sees the white, unmarred flesh. The memory is replaced by a surge of relief so powerful she wants to cry. Ruth does not pursue the memory but gathers her daughter into her arms, rocking silently.

Peg resists briefly. "Don't start with me, Ma! You were right, all right? He got drunk, he started grabbing at me. I hate him, all right? Isn't that what you want me to say?"

"No, baby, no," she says. "Hush, hush, it's all right now." Every hard thing Peg says is forgiven. Ruth thinks, *You don't understand. You can't understand. You don't know how men can be.*

Ruth knows.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

THE PASSIVITY OF A POST-FEMINIST 50 FT. WOMAN

BE CAREFUL what you wish for — you might just get it. That's good advice for those who have recently acquired a monkey paw. It is also good advice for movie fans. Sometimes you see a movie, realize what a missed opportunity it represents, and sadly wish someone else would re-do the whole dang thing.

I've done that. I've done it in these pages, in fact. A couple of years ago I ruminated upon the role of women in science fiction cinema in an essay I entitled "The Whine of a 50 Ft. Woman." The piece was general in nature, but did allow me to go off on one of the most tantalizing fiascos ever put to film, the "cult classic," *Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman* (1957).

You remember. In it, a floozified heiress, Nancy Archer (Allison Hayes), was attacked by an alien Kojak with a jewelry fetish, and later grew *really big*. This didn't help her failing marriage. (But then, nothing could have.)

Large or small, Nancy's two-timing, money-grubbing husband, Harry (William Hudson), wanted nothing to do with her. When the pathetic giantess realized that her beloved was off having a little tavern tryst with his favorite trollop, she wandered through town, moaning his name.

Upon arrival at his hang-out, Nancy smashed in the place to get to Harry, accidently killing his little friend. Thereupon, the authorities surrounded the wronged wife (with her wee hubby in hand) and shot her down into a power line. Nancy fell with a thud, still clutching her feckless mate. And as town menfolk clucked over the little dead guy in the grip of a *really big* dead gal, the credits rolled.

What a waste! Woman as the biggest piece of "dead meat" to ever

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bite the dust. And for what? She never even got to let loose like a real, self-respecting monster. But then, that was the sad point of that film. Allison Hayes's Nancy didn't have any self-respect. She was, it might be observed, a textbook case of a Woman Who Loved Too Much — and then got too big.

Nancy's "Attack" was as ineffectual as her life had been. She merely went from Little Girl Lost to Big Girl Lost, without ever realizing her potential as an avenging amazon. That's why I always wished that they'd remake that movie. Only now they have, and I wonder why they bothered.

For the new "modern, post-feminist" version, which premiered on HBO last December, offers little in the way of improvement, although it talks a more liberated game. And that is precisely what maddened me most about what little critical response greeted the film. The movie was labeled "politically correct."

But what does "politically correct" mean? Like most clichés, it doesn't mean anything now that the phrase has been used to death. And it never meant *much* to begin with. Catch-phrases are something we hide behind when we can't be bothered to analyze our reaction to something. And "politically correct" has become a popular knee-jerk conservative term designed to conjure up some kind of leftist (feminist, civil-rights-supporting, "multi-cultural") thought-police. Whoever they are.

Okay. So, I used the term myself — quite often, back when I thought I knew what was meant by it — in the '70s. And I used it occasionally right up until a couple of years ago when it became too loaded a buzz-term. That is, I heard it more and more, but understood it less and less.

The reviews of HBO's *Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman* illustrates what a negative catch-all adjective "politically correct" has become. I got the feeling that one critic who used the phrase meant to say that the movie was "boring." Another, "pretentious." Alternative definitions were "plodding" and "annoying." Several reviewers, it seemed, meant to say that the film was "too feminist."

If all that's what they meant, I'd almost agree with them. (Except for the "too feminist" bit.)

For, alas, 1993's *Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman*, as written by Joseph Dougherty (*thirtysomething, Cast a Deadly Spell*) and directed by Christopher Guest (*The Big Picture*), is just not as much fun as it ought to be. It has its moments. But not enough of them.

Part of the problem is that the

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gents who made this movie were clearly conflicted about how they should present their material. They wanted to put a modern, trendy spin on an old story, but they couldn't bear to leave the '50s behind. So, they ended up with something very schizophrenic: an up-to-date town that time forgot, filled with behind-the-times citizens who spout the latest psychobabble.

Even the costuming is a jumble. While Honey (Christi Conaway), the other woman, consistently looks like a beach-blanket bimbo who escaped from a bad road production of *Grease*, Dr. Theodora Cushing (Frances Fisher), the town shrink, dresses very much like the sophisticated '90s careerwoman. And Nancy Archer (Daryl Hannah) alternates between modern Rodeo Drive casual elegance and '60s shirtwaisted dorkiness. That is, before she gets big and dons the strapless push-up mini sheath, and the requisite Jane-of-the-Jungle skivvies.

Meanwhile, plotwise, Nancy's crooked papa (William Windom) is building a modern atrium mall in a desert berg that looks like its last new building was a 1950 Drive-In. Check out the marquee while you're there. It plays *The Adventures of Milo & Otis* (1989) continuously, in a changing double-bill with the likes of *Yentl* (1983). Note, too, that the Drive-In is the favorite stakeout of the film's most intriguing characters, Sheriff Denby (O'Neal Compton) and Deputy Spooner (Victoria Haas). They spend a lot of time playing "Wheel of Fortune" behind the wheel of a police car they obviously hijacked from Broderick Crawford's *Highway Patrol*.

Are you beginning to see what a muddle this movie is in? It sounds bad—and it is. Yet, I'd swear that the filmmakers purposely mixed and matched material artifacts of the last five decades. (I don't see how any of it could have been an accident.) Maybe they thought they were being clever. They probably thought, at least, that their cultural patchwork would keep the audience guessing, and therefore, interested.

Sorry, boys, it just don't work that way. Confusion doesn't entertain, it frustrates. A little bit of clarity would have made for a much better movie. And not just with the production design, costuming and the like. The tone of the writing and acting could have been a tad less erratic, too.

Mr. Dougherty couldn't decide whether he was writing a high-camp comedy or a psychodrama about gender issues. And Mr. Guest must have been equally unclear with his actors.

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Daniel Baldwin, as hubby Harry, plays his MCP for appreciative snickers (if not for belly laughs). Daryl Hannah's Nancy is, on the other hand, as earnest as all get out.

At least I *think* Ms. Hannah is going for an earnest demeanor. It's always hard to tell with her. She is a very attractive woman (if you go for gawky, nordic types), but she is not exactly the most brilliant actor of her generation. She is more a "look" than a performer. (How appropriate that such an iconic female celebrity should be linked with an heir-apparent of Camelot who has been anointed by the media as a "sexiest man alive.")

Daryl has always done best in parts requiring little emotional range. (That's why she made such a good replicant way back when.) But if we are to take author Joseph Dougherty seriously when he calls his screenplay a "positive fable of female empowerment," then the title role in *Attack* actually calls for a little scope from the lead actor.

Now, Ms. Hannah is certainly no worse than her predecessor, Allison Hayes, in the role. But that ain't sayin' much. Certainly, a character arc from super-wimp to Super Woman is more than she can pull off. That, no doubt, is one reason the movie relies on costume, makeup and hair design to show the "empowerment" of our heroine.

Nancy's fashion sense goes from dowdy to daring in the course of the film. At the same time her face goes from the natural look to a tramp paint job. And her lank locks go through the most impressive transformation of all. (I think they borrowed one of Tina Turner's electric-shock wigs for that final scene.)

But "empowerment" isn't about the way you look. It's about how you feel inside about yourself and your place in the world. And Nancy Archer 2, like Nancy Archer 1, gets big without really growing as a woman. Oh, she talks like a feminist. (That is to say, she speaks the way a male screenwriter would think a feminist speaks.) But her actions don't really match her self-actualization mumbo-jumbo pronouncements.

When Daryl's Nancy takes her rather laid-back rampage through town and to find Harry for "a little closure," Honey tries to shoot her. "Don't be stupid all your life," she tells Honey in a pseudo-sisterly fashion. "You're better than they are. You're smarter than they are. And you know more than you think....We *all* do."

Yeah, Nance. Well, you can talk the talk. But you can't quite bring yourself to walk the walk. Having a 25 foot stride isn't good enough. You

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have to act like a self-respecting monster. (Or, at least, a self-respecting woman.) Dr. Cushing feared that Nancy would, upon finding Harry, "ball him up like a used Kleenex." We should be so lucky.

Actually, no. I take that back. I'm not looking for anti-male violence from Nancy, even though the ads for the movie, stating that she is out to "get even" certainly suggest a vengeful heroine. (But a Lorena Bobbitt who is six stories tall is too frightening for even my fevered imagination.)

Nancy doesn't really need to stomp on her uncaring father or swat to kingdom come her contemptuous husband to make a change. All she has to do is walk away from two really exploitive relationships. (And with the leg span on that gal she could leave those guys eating her dust tout de suite!)

But, if it weren't for the intervention of our armed services, and an act of goddess from her new flying saucer compatriots, Nancy never would have broken away at all. Her tiny papa is still talking down to her during her last earthly moments. And when she is miraculously transported to a new life, who does she have with her? None other than her scornful, proudly sexist husband.

True, Harry isn't having a fun day. He's stuck in a consciousness-raising group for male Trekkers on Quaaludes in the final scene. But at least he's not a dead crumple of "used Kleenex." And he's still the proud sexist. Harry isn't going to change. And neither, I fear, will Nancy.

Nancy Archer got big, but she never really stood tall. She ends up a glittery Barbie in lovely Dream House spaceship. But that's just another change of hairdo, clothes and makeup. No matter what Joseph Dougherty told reporters, he did not write a movie about "female empowerment." Not about the kind of power I'm interested in, anyway.

Another golden opportunity to tell Nancy Archer's story blown to smithereens! Won't these guys ever get it right?

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Locus Magazine *once called Nina Kiriki Hoffman one of the Northwest's great undiscovered geniuses. Since then, her writing has grown beyond its cult following with the publication of her novel,* The Thread that Binds the Bones *(AvoNova, 1993), and a World Fantasy Award nomination for her novella, "Unmasking"* (Pulphouse/ Axolotl, *1992).*

She has sold us several stories, the most recent being the popular "Skeleton Key" which appeared in our August 1993 issue. With this novella, she returns to her mythical Oregon settings, this one being Spores Ferry, modeled on her hometown of Eugene.

Haunted Humans

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

One

DOROTHY JEAN DEMAIN, presently known as Dorothy Jean Hand, sometimes called Dot by people who didn't know her and almost always D.J. by those who did, gripped the phone handset between her ear and shoulder. Her right hand held a pen poised over a carbonless message pad; her left hand sorted the Mental Healing Center's mail. The four office hours following Friday's lunch break stretched ahead, aggravated by dealing with the operator who had picked up when D.J. rang the answering service.

"Sandy, have you checked account 551 for me yet?" D.J. said as patiently as she could, breaking in on two minutes of inane chatter.

She listened to Sandy splutter through a message for Dr. Arlene Bollings, D.J.'s boss, managing to extract relevant information with great difficulty. She was just about to demand the phone number of the person leaving the message when Sandy broke in with, "Uh, but — hey, Dot, there's a message here for you, too."

"Let's finish with the first one, please." D.J. could hear her voice

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tightening. She wanted to grab Sandy and shake the information out of her like salt. But she was in secretary mode right now, level, efficient, no matter what the circumstances. She hunched her shoulders, then took a calming breath.

"But the one for you is creepy." Sandy's voice was high, her words slow. D.J. wondered what she looked like; all she could tell was that Sandy chewed gum loudly and snappingly, and occasionally smoked; the small sucked intakes of breath were a giveaway.

"I still need the phone number on this one, Sandy." Sandy had purged vital information from the files without communicating it before. D.J. had learned the hard way to persist with her.

After three tries, Sandy managed to tell her the phone number. D.J. wrote, sighed, and said, "Is that it for this message?"

"Yeah, I guess. There's one from that psycho nutcase Dr. Kabukin's seeing — "

D.J. resisted an urge to ask just which psycho nutcase. Dr. Kabukin handled therapy cases, while Dr. Bollings did divorce, custody, and criminal evaluations for the courts. D.J. generally liked Dr. Kabukin's patients better. Most of them were interested in changing. Most of Dr. Bollings' patients were interested in fooling the doctor.

" — a couple real boring messages for the other doctors, and then this one for you. It's pretty weird, Dot."

"Why don't you read it to me?" And get it over with? D.J. poised her pen at the top of the next message blank, wondering if Sandy would communicate any of the information in order.

"To, uh, Dorothy Jean, from Chase. Do you suppose that's a first or a last name?"

To stop her hand from shaking, D.J. pressed the pen down on the message form so hard it punched through several sheets. "Go on."

"There's, like, no number. It just says, 'You know what I need and I'm coming to get it.' Don't you think that's weird?"

D.J. said nothing.

"Well, I do. Kind of creepy. Did you get that? 'You know what I need and I'm coming to get it.' Dot, you still there? Darn, I bet she hung up. Why do people always hang up on me?"

Deciding to take this as a suggestion, D.J. quietly lowered the phone's

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handset until it clicked into the cradle. Chase? It couldn't be Chase. She stared over the four-foot-high divider that separated her desk and computer hutch from the office waiting room, her gaze finally settling on the crystal vase of Double Delight roses Dr. Kabukin had brought in that morning and set among the magazines and self-help books on the glass-topped table between the two blue-and-white striped couches. Look how pink and white the roses are, D.J. thought, just like a baby, perhaps, or the hopes of a young girl on her wedding night.

From the white walls, colorful abstract pictures glowed in the sun slanting through the picture window. Leftover Oregon raindrops glistened on the lawn out front. Everything in D.J.'s view looked cool and clean and calm. Untouched tranquility, like her life before Chase.

She shuddered and lifted the phone again. For a moment she closed her eyes tight, concentrating on crushing all the thoughts she didn't want to entertain. She pressed autodial for the answering service, and smiled down at the message pad when Poppy picked up.

"Account 551, please," D.J. said, and took the rest of the messages without a hitch.

Morgan Hesch sat on one of the puffy striped couches in the Mental Healing Center waiting room and stared at the bits of dirt he'd tracked on the white speckled rug. Why did they have a lawn out front if they wanted to keep the rug clean? Well, yeah, there was a brick walk that wound across the lawn, but what if you were coming from the other direction? And the lawn was green and healthy, but there were those flower beds. Somebody must rake the edges all the time to make the dirt look so — so *clean*. Like nothing had ever stepped on it since the dawn of time. Morgan hated that kind of clean. If blackboards were bare in his college classes when he got there, he always chalked something on them before he sat down. If the dirt were blank he just had to put a footprint in it. If things were wide open, any force, good or evil, could enter and control them.

So the floor was no longer blank, either, not peppered with those chunks of earth that had fallen out of the waffle-stomper soles of his hiking boots. Morgan looked at the bits of squared dirt and slid his left hand in between the third and fourth buttons on his shirt, hiding it against his chest. One of his insiders, Shadow, always wanted to hide Morgan's hands.

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"Miss Deej?" Morgan said, his knees knocking against each other, not because he was cold, just to be doing something.

He could only see the top of her head over the wall that hid the desk from him and everybody else. She had messy frizzy brown hair that she parted in the middle. He watched the part lean back until he could see Deej's eyes, green like the devil's, over the divider as she looked at him.

"Yes, Morgan," she said. One of her better voices. Not the first-time-&-phone voice which said, I'm-here-to-help,-don't bother-to-know-I'm-human. Definitely not the I-can't-have-a-relationship-with-you-because-it-wouldn't-be-professional voice. She'd given up on that one after he'd been seeing Dr. Dara Kabukin for two months. Not the don't-bother-me-I'm-in-the-middle-of-something voice, and not the okay,-okay-yes-I-guess-I-can-look-up voice. More of a I-don't-know-what-I'm-doing-but-I'm-glad-for-a-distraction voice. Actually he didn't think he'd ever heard her use this one before.

Morgan figured Deej must have insiders since she had lots of voices like he did. Also, she was one of the few people who could recognize his insiders just by the way they talked. Even Dr. Dara got confused sometimes, but Deej always knew who was talking if it was anybody she'd ever talked to before. Timmy liked to play tricks on Deej, but even he was happy when the tricks didn't work. Morgan wondered if Deej had ever thought about being a doctor. Even though her hair was messy and she had the devil's eyes, he might go see her if she was a doctor.

"I'm thirsty," he said.

"Would you like some water?"

"Yes, please. And paper? Pencil?" The voice that asked the last part belonged to the newest insider, who wasn't used to using Morgan's vocal cords and wasn't supposed to talk until Morgan had gotten to know him, anyway. The new insider's voice hadn't sorted itself out yet; it sounded a lot like Morgan.

Deej stood up so he could see about a third of her, the top third. She was wearing a blue and white shirt, and some little bits of color on her lips, just the outside edges. Mostly if she had any color on her lips it was all over them.

Today was not like other days.

She held out some white paper and a pencil with a blunt tip. After he took the things from her, she headed into the other room, the one with the sink and the little baby fridge and the table where you took tests.

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The new insider was clamoring to get its hands on the paper and pencil. Morgan's appointment with Dr. Dara wouldn't start for another fifteen minutes. Morgan asked this anxious new insider if fifteen minutes would be enough, and the insider said he'd do what he could, if it was okay with Morgan. Sure, said Morgan. He sat back and let go of his hands. The insider used the left hand to draw a picture real fast of a man's face. The man had dark thick eyebrows and shadowy eyes and his mouth was wide but it sure wasn't smiling. What interested Morgan as he watched the picture form in front of him was that it looked like a photograph, with gray places under the nose and eyebrows, like parts of the face stuck right out of the paper and had shadows. He had never drawn anything like this before.

He finished. Deej brought him a cup with water in it, then looked at his picture without asking and dropped the water. The water splashed on Deej's sandals. Some hit Morgan's hiking boots, but most of it hit the rug.

"Miss Deej," said Morgan.

"Ah, ah, ah, oh, I'm sorry, Morgan," she said, breathing like a dog on a hot day. "I'll get you another."

"Miss Deej, you having a seizure?" he asked.

"Well, maybe, yes, maybe," she said, and ran into the sink-fridge-test room.

Today was definitely not like other days. Morgan had never seen Deej upset before.

When she came back, she handed him the water without spilling any and said, "Morgan, who is that a picture of?"

"I don't know. One of the insiders did it."

"Which insider?"

"Now, Miss Deej," said Clift, "you know it would be unprofessional of us to discuss our case with the secretary."

"Oh, come on, Clift," said Deej. "I'm not asking you for a diagnosis or even intimate personal details. I was just wondering which one of you did it."

Clift thought that over, and said, "Well, the truth is, Miss Deej, we can't tell you which insider. Somebody new is all we know."

"Do you know who the man in the picture is?"

"Do you?" asked Mishka in her little baby girl voice. She thought it was a game. She was three and thought most things were games.

"Do *you*?" Deej repeated.

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"I asked you first," said Mishka.

"I asked you second, and two is bigger than one."

"Well, *I* don't know," Mishka said, but at the same time the left hand was writing something on the piece of paper. Morgan looked down. "Chase Kennedy," the words said.

Deej put her hands over her mouth. Her eyes got wide.

"Somebody you know?" Saul asked, with an ugly edge to his tone. Saul was mean to everybody. Morgan didn't like it when Saul took the voice because he made people not like Morgan.

"Somebody you know?" Deej said, right back. She'd met Saul before and she still liked Morgan. One of the few.

"No," said Saul.

"How could you draw a picture of somebody you don't know? Did you see his picture in a magazine or something?"

"There are some things mankind was not meant to know," said the Shadow in his creepy echoey voice.

"How about womankind?" asked Deej, but just then the phone rang and she disappeared back behind her desk. Her voice turned into the polite-to-company voice she always used on the phone as she said, "Good afternoon, Mental Healing Center, may I help you?"

Dr. Dara came out of the door to the back hallway, smiling and leading a young fat woman toward the door to outside. "All right, Elena, same time next week?" she said, her voice faintly accented. Only two of the insiders had accents that Morgan could hear, and they were Valerie, the Southern one, and Saul, who was from New Jersey. The rest of his insiders sounded pretty much like people on TV. Dr. Dara was from somewhere else. England? England, even though she had narrow black eyes and totally black hair like people from Japan.

The fat woman stared at the floor, mumbled something, glanced up quickly at Dr. Dara and then away again. Morgan remembered being like that when he first started seeing the doctor, not being able to look anybody in the eye, not being able to talk clearly, not wanting anybody to look at him. When the insiders had first come, they made him do things and he was in trouble all the time because of them and he couldn't get them to cooperate. Even though it was his body, they didn't listen to him. Not till Clift came, and started getting everybody to work as a team. Morgan studied the patient. She

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wore a big ugly navy-blue dress, and a belt that cut into her middle, and her hair was heavy and tangled, her face greasy, with little sores on it.

Mishka felt sorry for her and said, "Bye bye. Bye bye."

The fat woman looked at him like she was scared, which probably wasn't what Mishka meant to happen. Mishka wasn't very good at figuring out how people would feel about what she did. The others tried to talk her out of taking control without asking, but she had these impulses all the time and you couldn't watch out for them twenty-six hours a day. Morgan shrugged. "Sorry," he said. Then he gave speech number six, one Dr. Dara had drilled him on for several weeks: "Didn't mean anything by it. Have a nice day."

"Thanks," said the fat woman, trying to smile and frowning instead.

"Take care, Elena," Dr. Dara said, escorting her out the door. She sighed as she shut the door behind the woman, then turned. Every hair was in place — Clift sometimes called Dr. Dara "Helmet-head" — and her lipstick was bright and even. She smiled. "Morgan," she said.

"She's a new one, right?"

"Absolutely new. You were very good, Morgan. Come on back to the office. What have you drawn today? Who did it?"

"It's a picture for Miss Deej," Morgan said. "A guy named Campbell did it."

Deej stared at him.

"He just told me, Deej. I didn't know before, honest. Gary Campbell."

"Gary?" said Deej, her voice high and little like Mishka's. Definitely Morgan and Deej had something in common. Morgan wondered what she would say if he asked her for a date. He had the impression that people in the office weren't supposed to date patients.

The new insider, Gary, was trying to get a word out. Morgan thought that was pretty pushy for somebody who'd just come to him, so he and Clift squashed the guy down. "Wait your turn, Gary," Morgan said, but he handed the picture to Deej.

"Thanks," she said, still in that little high voice.

"I like you, Miss Deej," Morgan said, figuring that would be something she'd remember he had said until he finished talking to Dr. Dara, and then he might ask Deej about the date idea.

"Come on, Morgan," said Dr. Dara.

As Morgan followed Dr. Dara back into her office, Clift came out. "Let's

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not discuss integration today, Doctor, all right? You know we're not a true multiple, and I think integration would be bad for Morgan. If anything, he needs to build himself up at the expense of the rest of us. He's still too wide open. Imagine us picking up another one. I can't seem to convince him to close the door. You get him started thinking he can work us in here with him and he'll start accepting any damn Tom, Dick, or Mary that comes along and knocks."

"What topic would you suggest, Clift?" asked Dr. Dara.

"We definitely, definitely, need more work on socialization. That speech worked — wasn't that great? We've said that about six times in the correct context since last week, and Morgan's finally starting to believe it works. I tell him things and tell him things and he just doesn't pay attention, but when you tell him, he actually listens."

"Well, yes, that is my function, Clift. Let me just check with Morgan, see if he's got an agenda for this afternoon, all right?"

"Okay," said Clift grumpily and subsided.

"Did you find the tape in the dictaphone?" Dr. Bollings asked D.J. as D.J. handed her a stack of message slips and opened and sorted mail.

"Oh," D.J. said. With the picture Morgan had drawn in front of her, she had had trouble concentrating on work at all. She turned the picture face down and forced all her thoughts about Chase away. She had had a lot of practice ditching thoughts of Chase, but she knew she would have to think hard about him soon. This was just too weird. Something must have happened. She needed to find and read some recent newspapers, though she had been avoiding news in the three years since the trial. "It's been such a madhouse I haven't gone into your office since lunchtime. Is the tape long? I'll stay till I finish typing it."

"Just a few letters, but they should go out today."

"I'll get right on it." She got the tape out of Dr. Bollings' dictaphone, plugged it into her own, rewound it, started the computer, macro'd up the letter format, and began typing, putting her brain on auto.

Dear Dr. Kennedy:

I was pleased to receive your recent inquiry regarding office space.

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Regrettably, I must tell you that our last vacancy was filled a month ago. If I can be of any help to you in recommending other local office facilities, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,
Arlene Bollings, Ph.D.

The tape went on: "Oh, D.J., would you look up that address? It's on the envelope in the out basket."

Damn, thought D.J., I was in such a hurry to get the tape I forgot to check the out basket. Just then Dr. Bollings came out of her office with a handful of papers and gave them to D.J.

"Thanks, Boss," D.J. said and sighed.

"You're in some kind of mood today, aren't you?" asked Dr. Bollings.

"What was your first clue?"

The doctor just smiled. "Lucky the schedule's light today. Rest up over the weekend. I've got five reports to dictate, and I plan to spend a lot of Saturday over a hot mike, so you'll have plenty to do on Monday."

"Promises, promises," said D.J. She sorted through the stack of papers, found the letter and envelope from Dr. Kennedy on the bottom of the pile.

D.J. put the letter on the copystand next to her keyboard and positioned the cursor a line below the date so she could type in the address.

Dr. Chase Kennedy, Ph.D.

"Arlene!" D.J. cried.

Two

D.J.'S LANDLADY AFRA was watering the dwarf dahlias in the front planter at the Coat of Arms Apartments building when D.J. parked her six-year-old silver Tercel in the car port. D.J. groaned before she climbed out of the car and locked the door. Afra always wanted to talk, and D.J. was definitely not in the mood today.

"You got plans for the weekend, hon, or you going to spend it holed up with the TV again like the last six weeks? Have you thought about getting some sun? You're so pasty!" Afra said as D.J. trudged up the concrete walk toward the front door.

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"Have you heard about UV?" D.J. said, then really wondered. Afra was who knew how old; her face was leathery and worn like any skin tanned by years of sunlight.

"UV? Is that short for some new kind of perversion or drug? I have trouble keeping up with the kinds of mischief you youngsters get into anymore."

"Uh, no, it's ultra-violet rays from the sun. They cause cancer."

"Doesn't everything," Afra said.

Before she could get started on another topic, D.J. said, "I've got to get inside and make dinner. I'm tired."

"'Course you are, not enough fresh air, too much television, and improper nutrition." Afra waved her hand in a shooing motion. D.J. escaped. She checked her mailbox, afraid. She'd signed up here as D.J. Hand, and had paid to keep her number unlisted. But if Chase could track her to her job, he could track her to her home.

The only thing in her mailbox was the fall catalog for Community Education. She carried it upstairs to her second floor apartment, feeling relieved when she had fastened the chain from the inside.

Then she turned around to face her studio apartment and saw the writing on the wall. Red spraypaint, right across her Van Gogh and Rembrandt art prints. "Only you can purify me. Only through your blood will I be saved."

She would never forget his handwriting.

She had seen it in the love notes he'd left with flowers when he had courted her, four years ago. Later, she had seen his handwriting on the anonymous notes that the police found next to the corpses. She had seen it in the letters Chase wrote her from Death Row.

Those letters had finally driven her to give up a paralegal position with a future in it at one of the big law firms in San Francisco and move north, to Spores Ferry, Oregon, a town of a hundred thousand, as small a place as she could live in and not go crazy, she figured. Gary Campbell, the first detective who had seriously listened to her when she mentioned her suspicions about her boyfriend to the task force, the one she had kept in contact with after the sentencing hearing, had told her she didn't even have to open the letters. Chase couldn't get her, he said. But she opened the letters. She had to. Finally she had run anyway. She hadn't left any forwarding address anywhere, not even with her mother.

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And maybe she had been right, and Gary had been wrong. Maybe Chase had been playing with her, through the trial, the sentencing hearing, even his going to jail for three years, just so he could come back and find her now, hidden as she was, ferreting out her job and her apartment and everything she had to cling to in her new existence.

A knock sounded on her door. She jerked and gasped, dropping her mail and her purse. Her heart speeded. She looked around for anything she could use as a weapon, grabbed an antique umbrella she had picked up at a yard sale, and went to the door.

Through the peep she saw Morgan's gaunt young face, his wispy black mustache. He had done something to his hair; instead of hanging lank and half over his face, it had height to it. Mousse? Gel? Morgan with fashion sense? A frightening thought. And he was standing up straight. Usually she saw him slouched on a couch. He was taller than she had thought.

"You alone?" she asked through the door.

"Deej, you know me better than that."

She slipped the chain off and turned the locks. "I just got home," she said. "I wasn't expecting you for another hour."

"Would you like me to go away for a while?" asked his fruitiest and most refined voice.

"No, Clift; I was just explaining why I haven't had time to change. Actually, I'd like you to come in."

Morgan blinked and stared.

"Actually, I'm kind of scared right now." Her voice wobbled. She reached out and took his narrow hand, pulled him into the apartment. "Look." She pointed to the graffiti.

"Messy," said Morgan in an approving voice.

She looked sideways at him, this gawky college boy with his many voices, and thought, what a thin reed I'm leaning on. I should send him home and talk to the police. Tell them my history, ask them to find out whether Chase is still in jail or not. "Morgan, did you really ask Dr. Kabukin if it was all right for us to see each other?"

"No," he said.

"What? But you said — "

"Sure," said Saul. "She would have told me to forget it, so I decided not to ask her. What do you think, lady, it's productive for a psycho to date his

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doctor's secretary? Jeeze, take a minute to think."

"Wait a second. I'm not the doctor around here. How would I know? Besides, you lied to me."

"Like no one's ever done that before?" Saul said, sneering.

"Morgan never did before," said D.J.

"How would you know?" Saul said.

"Shut up, Saul," said Clift. "D.J.'s right. Morgan never lied to her before. Of course, this particular lie was hopelessly transparent. Why did you believe it? You could have checked with Dr. Dara before you said yes to us. Usually you're so efficient."

"I — "

"I doubt it's the body," Clift continued, holding out his arms and looking down at Morgan's slender frame. "I've been trying to get him interested in swimming, but one of the others died by drowning and won't go near water. Or is this a body type that appeals to you?"

"No, I — "

"Wait a minute," Clift said. "Wait. A. Minute. It's Gary, isn't it?"

D.J. sighed and closed her eyes.

"That prick?" Saul yelled. "You know he's a cop? We got a damned cop in here with us. Pushy rude bastard!"

"D.J., is that the story? It's Gary you want to see?" Clift asked. "Was the picture that important?"

"I'm sorry, Clift. Sorry, Morgan. I think I know...." She couldn't believe what she was about to say. D.J. had never known quite what to make of Morgan and his many voices. Dr. Kabukin was not a slave to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* the way Dr. Bollings was; she didn't diagnose her patients with number codes you could look up to identify their particular disorder. So D.J. didn't have a convenient label for Morgan. She just thought he was funny, and found several of his voices willing to play games with her, even though they also enjoyed irritating her.

But Gary — that was a different story. If Gary were Gary Campbell, the cop she had known in San Francisco.... How could she deny it? How could Morgan possibly know enough about her to draw a picture of Chase Kennedy out of the blue? The explanation she came up with was too silly to think about. But she had to think about it anyway. Maybe all the voices in Morgan were indeed different people. Maybe he was psychic and tuned in to all these

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other people, or maybe —

"Clift, are you a ghost?"

"Why, D.J., you're the first person besides Morgan to come up with that explanation. I'm flattered."

"Yes, but would you answer?"

"And I've told Dr. Kabukin about that, too, but she continues to nurse her own pet theories. We do make progress, when she gives us ideas about how to handle society in a way that won't scare it, but when she tries to get us to consider getting together, one has to shudder."

D.J. tried a different tack. "How did you die, Clift?"

"In a ridiculously mundane fashion. A car crash. I had always hoped that I would irritate some rival intellectual into committing a fiendishly clever murder, but I didn't live long enough to achieve maximum irritation and my dream death. No, instead I was out driving to the university library one night when a drunk in a big American car crossed the center line and plowed right into the side of my small Japanese car, crushing it and me between his grill and the wall of a bank. A savings and loan, if I recall correctly. At least there was a metaphor there."

"What year was this?"

"Two years ago."

"Where?"

"East Lansing. They're very into big American cars there. Did you know that a number of car makers have factories there?"

"No," said D.J. "So how did you find Morgan?"

"Well, I was frustrated about suffering such a meaningless death, so I didn't feel ready to shuffle off this mortal coil. On the other hand, haunting a sidewalk or an auto junkyard didn't fulfill my need for some kind of recognition either. I was drifting around aimlessly, trying to figure out what I *could* do in my powerless state when I felt this peculiar pull from the west, and thought what the hell. I gave in and found myself sucked right into Morgan's body. He was playing with a Ouija board at the time. Since I arrived I've tried to discourage him from engaging in this game, but he's not always amenable to direction. Worse, he doesn't seem to need the board anymore; random spirits just show up here and crowd in with the rest of us."

D.J. bit her lower lip. She had found Clift the most reasonable of Morgan's voices, but just now she didn't know what to believe.

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"But, to bring us up to speed, we were talking about Gary, weren't we?" Clift said.

She swallowed, and said, "I think I know Gary from when he was alive."

"Really? I thought that was just an attention-getting device on his part, claiming he had something to tell you. When we get somebody new we usually try to gentle them down for a while before we let them play with the body. They can get us in a lot of trouble if we let them out unsupervised. When Saul first came, Morgan woke up in a bordello across a state line, and went into shock. He's never quite recovered from the mortification. He's awfully young, something Saul refuses to take into consideration. But if Gary was telling the truth.... May we sit down?"

"What? Oh, sure, sure," said D.J., clearing a stack of books off a chair for him. She closed and locked the door, then said, "Would you like something to drink? I've got instant coffee or tea or lemonade."

"No, thanks," said Clift. "We need a little quiet to thrash this out amongst ourselves. Excuse me, please."

"Sure," said D.J. She went into the kitchen and poured herself a nip of brandy, swallowed it without tasting. She coughed as the warmth bit into her, then decided to put some water in the kettle for tea anyway.

She was leaning on the counter, staring at the kettle and wondering if it would boil as she watched, when a new voice called to her from the living room/bed room/dining room. "Doro?"

She straightened, gripping her elbows so hard she could feel her fingertips drilling into her skin. After a moment and a couple of deep breaths she walked out into the living room and looked at Morgan.

His eyes, usually a pale blue, looked darker, and his mouth wore a crooked smile she had never seen there before, but she had seen it. She had seen it.

"Ain't this a bitch?" he said, and laughed, deep and low.

"Gary," she whispered, chilled.

"Poor bastard, lonely kid, just wants to make some friends, doesn't know how to talk to girls, invites in the wide world of spirits. Christ, Doro, never thought I'd see you again this way."

"Gary," she said, clutching her elbows, her shoulders hunching higher.

"Yes, well," he said, and tilted his head in a certain way, so that he was looking up at her from under his brows, "the world being as it is — Christ,

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Doro, what a world! — I think we should talk about the case again."

"Gary, how did you die?"

"That's the point, isn't it? Chase has escaped."

D.J. let out a scream just for the hell of it, releasing tension, then said, "Well, I kind of thought — " and pointed to the writing on the wall. "And he left messages for me at the office."

Gary looked up and his eyes went wide. "God, Doro! Get out of here!"

"Without a game plan? Let's think this through first."

"He knows where you live! Go somewhere else immediately."

"Oh, come on. I don't want to run around like a headless chicken. Let me pack a few things, and get my credit card and my bank numbers and like that."

"All those things can be traced. Ditch them."

"That doesn't make any sense. How could Chase trace my credit card and my bank?"

"You asked how I died. He came for me as soon as he escaped, and — " He closed his eyes, masked his face with his hands, and said in a low voice, very quickly, "tortured me to find out where you were, and killed me."

D.J. hesitated. She looked away. "You knew where I was?"

He sighed. He looked at her. "I shouldn't have, but I wanted to keep track of you. Followed the transfer of ownership on your car through the DMV. I knew your new name and your p.o. box number, the town." He paused, grabbed breath, looked away from her. "He — Doro — he — I didn't want to tell." He pressed his mouth shut, then looked up at her from under his brows. "I couldn't stop myself from saying it. I couldn't stop myself." He closed his eyes tight and thunked fists on his head.

She let go of herself and gripped his fists. Tears spilled down her face. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Yes, well, there's no going back, and time is running past us. Pack what you need and let's get out of here."

"Okay." She got her big duffel out of the closet and began throwing clothes into it.

"Can I help?" asked Morgan, the Gary look in his face gone, his voice scared.

"Sure," she said. She looked around, then grabbed one of her spare purses, a big one made of turquoise rip-stop nylon. "Why don't you go in the bathroom and put the stuff from the medicine cabinet in here? Thanks,

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Morgan. Thanks for everything."

"Some date," he said, but he didn't sound unhappy.

She smiled, then frowned as he disappeared. "Can you ask Gary if I should call the police about this?" she yelled.

"Wait until you find a safe place to call from," Clift called back.

D.J. did a swift job of packing all her favorite clothes and tucking important papers in her purse.

"Here," said Morgan, coming out of the bathroom with a bulging purse. Without pausing for breath, Gary's voice came out: "He's probably watching the building right now, and for sure he'll follow your car, especially if he sees you carrying luggage. I bet he's out there waiting to find out how you've reacted to the note. What does he know so far? No police have showed up, not much of an outcry. Maybe he thinks you're too spooked to do anything about it. Maybe he's coming in to get you right now."

"He doesn't know about you, though."

"We can't know that for sure. I mean, he can't know about me, Gary, but he might know about Morgan; he knows where you work. Can we stash your stuff away from the apartment? That way someone could pick it up later without tipping him by going into your apartment."

"I have storage space in the basement."

"After that we can drive to a public place and catch other transportation," Gary said. "We should be able to evade him long enough to get you some protection."

With Morgan acting as scout, D.J. carried her things down to the basement, which had an in-building access stairway, and put them in her storage space, pondering whether to padlock them in or not. She had never had anything disturbed in the basement. On the other hand, if Chase were here — he had made a science out of sneaking into places where people lived and studying them, while people were present and asleep. Wanting to study people's lifestyles was one curiosity he hadn't bothered to hide from D.J. when their relationship was most intense. His favorite movie was Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. "Just the little bits of life he sees, don't you love it? All those stories lying there unveiled. You can learn so much by walking around at night and looking in through windows."

She stared at her storage space and shuddered. Nothing could keep him from pawing through the skins of her new life. She closed the door and

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fastened the padlock.

Like a padlock would stop him, any more than her locked apartment door had.

"So where should we go?" she asked, turning toward Morgan, who was standing a few feet away.

At the top of the basement stairs, a man stood backlit by daylight.

THREE

D.J. GRIPPED MORGAN'S arm and drew him quietly back toward her. Though there was a light on in the basement, it was dim compared with the daylight coming in through the building's back door. There was a chance Chase hadn't seen that Morgan was down here.

"Yes," said that thrilling rich voice, Chase's voice, that once had fueled her fantasies and later haunted her nightmares, "where should we go?"

D.J. looked around for anything that would serve as a weapon. There was some community property scattered around the common area between the storage closets, things nobody really wanted but had neglected to throw out. She found a dead-headed mop and gripped it with both hands.

His voice sank to a near whisper, curling its way down the stairs. "If you had a choice, where would you go? I want you on my altar, Dorothy Jean. I need you to be my sacrament this time. Only you can give me last rites."

"Young man!" Afra's voice came from somewhere beyond Chase. "Do you have legitimate business in my building? If not, I'll have to ask you to leave."

The shadowed head looked up, away; and then he was gone, his footsteps pounding down the hallway toward the back door of the building.

Finally D.J. let the trembling take her, now that the immediate danger was gone. Her shoulders shook, but her hands were locked around the mop-stick. Breathing fast, she glanced at Morgan, saw that he had moved into the shadow of one of the storage cabinets and was holding a splintery baseball bat over his shoulder. Something about his expression told her Gary was the one behind the eyes.

"D.J.? You down there? What was that all about? Some young hooligan making an obscene phone call in person?"

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At last D.J. drew in a deep breath and lowered the mop. "Afra. Afra. Oh, Afra," she said, her voice quavering. She walked toward the steps and looked up. "Thanks, Afra."

"For what? I did wonder if it was exactly an appropriate moment to bring out my hand-gun, but the way things are these days, I thought it better to be safe."

"Much better," D.J. said, climbing the stairs. Morgan followed her. They both held onto their makeshift weapons. "I have to tell you about him." She glanced down the hall toward the back door, which was still open. She and Morgan ran to look out, heard a car engine growling around a corner, gone beyond sight.

"Sounds like a beetle," said Saul.

"You know cars?" D.J. asked.

"Any amateur can tell a beetle," Saul said, "but as a matter of fact, yes, I know cars. One of the few things that kept my interest before I jumped off that bridge in Jersey."

"What's all the fuss about? Who's your young man, D.J.?" Afra said. She was, indeed, holding a large revolver, barrel pointed floorward. "I never heard *him* come in. And I was keeping an ear out."

"Afra, this is Morgan, a friend from work. Morgan, this is Afra, my landlady. Can we go to your apartment? I've got to tell you about that man."

"You vouch for this rude young man?"

D.J. glanced at Morgan. "Oh, yes, Afra. He has rough edges, but he's really very sweet."

Morgan's eyes widened. She knew it was Morgan inside, and that relieved her. She didn't want Saul talking to Afra.

"All right," said Afra. She still looked suspicious. "Come on in."

They followed her into her apartment. Inside, every flat surface that wasn't designed for people to sit or walk on bore treasures from the sea: twisted driftwood, sand-scoured glass, a crab carapace, bowls of water with shining rocks lining the bottom, fragments of sand dollars and shells, gull feathers. The air smelled salty.

"Have a seat. I'll bring you some tea," said Afra, disappearing into the kitchen.

D.J. sat on the couch and tried to figure out how to frame an explanation.

Morgan flopped down beside her, turned on his side so he could watch

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her. "Miss Deej?" he said.

"Morgan," she said. She smiled at him.

"You really think I'm sweet?"

"You are sweet."

"Not just because of Clift and Gary and Mishka and Shadow and Elaine and Saul and Timmy and Valerie?"

Elaine? Valerie? thought D.J., but aloud, she said, "Just because of you."

"Wow," he said. "Nobody ever said anything like that about me. No girl ever said anything nice about me before."

"Really? Not even the ones inside you?"

"Well," he said, and frowned. "But that's different. It's not like they have a choice."

"Oh, Sweetie," said a new voice from Morgan that D.J. hadn't heard before, a rich husky female voice, "we've got a choice, all right. We could be insulting you all the time; but Deej is right. You *are* sweet."

"Wow," said Morgan. He lay back and stared at the ceiling.

"Who were you talking to?" Afra asked, coming in with a tea tray, a Japanese tea pot and three small handle-less cups.

"Morgan does impressions," D.J. said.

"Really? Who was that supposed to be? Lauren Bacall?"

"They're not famous people," Morgan said, "just people I know."

"Odd," said Afra. "How could you take an act like that on the road?"

"Dr. Dara says it's more like they're different parts of me, or, like, I choose a different voice to express different things."

"D.J. Bubbe," said Afra. "A friend from work?"

"That's not important right now," D.J. said. "What's important is that I have to leave the building, because that guy you chased off knows I live here. He's looking for me. He wants to kill me. He's already killed four other people, Afra. You've been trying to find out about my past, well, here it is. His name's Chase Kennedy. Do you remember the case? He was my boyfriend in my other life, and while he was romancing me, he was murdering other women. I worked with the police to catch and convict him. He was on Death Row last I heard, but today, I got messages from him at work, and when I came home, I found a message from him there, and Morgan was just helping me move out when he showed up and you got rid of him. I've got to find someplace to hide."

"Are you serious?" Afra asked.

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D.J. stared at her.

Afra said, "He scared off awfully easy."

"He likes being alone with his victims. It's one of his things. Besides, that was a pretty big gun you had."

Afra poured tea. Morgan sat up and accepted a cup. D.J. accepted a cup too, and watched her hostess. After they had sipped in silence for a little while, Afra said, "You're thinking about this wrong. Better if you fort up here, get your protection, keep a vigil; call the police. They could watch outside, catch him trying to get in. There you are. No running and hiding. A running target's a lot more vulnerable than somebody who chooses her own ground."

D.J. looked at Morgan, wondering if Gary had two cents he'd like to toss in at this point.

"If you'll sit there with that gun in your lap, I'll watch out the front window while Doro calls the police," said Gary. "Good thing it's still light."

Afra's eyebrows lowered at this new voice from Morgan, but she set down her cup and retrieved the gun from a drawer by the front door.

"Phone's over there," said Afra, pointing toward the kitchen.

"Gary, you know anyone up here?" D.J. asked, heading for the phone.

"I don't think so."

Afra said, "How come you introduced this boy as Morgan and now you're calling him Gary?"

"Morgan has a different name for each voice, Afra. I know it sounds weird, but...." There was no way D.J. could explain this sensibly. Frowning, she paged through Afra's phone book until she found a non-emergency number for the police and dialed.

A woman answered. D.J. pulled herself together. "Hi. I was wondering if you could help me. I think someone's trying to kill me."

The woman listened while D.J. ran the story past her. The woman said someone would be over to check the handwriting on the wall soon.

D.J. hung up and felt despair. How could anybody take her seriously? "Did that sound convincing?" she asked Morgan, wondering if Gary was still in the forefront.

He was. "Don't worry. They should check everything, no matter how strange it sounds. Especially in a community like this one, where there probably isn't a lot going on. You won't have to talk them into it. The evidence will."

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D.J. replaced the phone book on the lower shelf of the phone stand. "I sure hope so." She tried to compare herself with people she had observed when they came to be evaluated by Dr. Bollings. No, she wasn't hysterical or tangential; her orientation as to time and place were good; she didn't sound irrational. Of course, some of the most coherent-sounding people turned out to be the really disturbed ones. Maybe her affect was *too* flat. Maybe she should have talked faster.

But really, the situation was absurd.

She remembered the stab of terror she had felt when Chase's voice came from the shadow at the top of the stairs, and she sank down slowly and smoothly until she was sprawled on Afra's rug. *He was here. He was coming for her. He had killed before. Even Gary hadn't been able to stop him. Nobody knew where he was.*

She lay immobilized for a while, her gaze fixed on a water stain on the ceiling that looked like a skull. Her hands and feet felt as if they were miles away, and she couldn't seem to move them.

Sounds came through the cotton over her ears, but for a time she didn't sort them out. A hand touched her shoulder and she jerked, then lay still. A head interrupted her focus on the ceiling. Young face, Fu Manchu mustache, wide worried blue eyes. "Deej? Miss Deej?" the mouth said.

She blinked and noticed that she was breathing.

Afra's face appeared beside Morgan's. "Child? Child, are you all right?"

D.J. brought a hand up, rubbed it over her face. "What happened?" she said.

"You kind of fainted," said Morgan, his brows pinched together above the bridge of his nose. "I never seen a girl do that before."

D.J. closed her eyes and tried to reconcile this with her own image of herself. It was hard. "Sorry," she said.

"Good Lord," said Afra, "if anyone ever had an excuse to faint, you do."

"I thought people only fainted because of bad corsets," D.J. said, and tried to sit up. Morgan put a hand under her elbow and helped her. "Thanks," she said, looking at him. Saul's sneer lifted the corner of his mouth, but his eyes looked kind.

A knock sounded on the door, and Afra went over to let a uniformed policeman in. With Saul's help, D.J. struggled to her feet. She looked at him and smiled. He smirked back and pinched her rear.

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"You're such a shmuck," she whispered.

"So they say," he whispered back, and slid an arm around her waist. "Put your arm around my shoulders and I'll help you over to the couch."

Furious, she obeyed him. As he let her down on the couch, his hand strayed up to feel her breast so quickly no one could have noticed it except the two of them. "Stop it," she whispered through clenched teeth as he sat down beside her, still smirking. "Think what you're teaching Morgan."

"Exactly," he whispered. "Kid's way too passive."

Afra brought the policeman over. "This is Officer Vance," she said. "Can you talk to him, D.J.?"

D.J. rubbed her eyes, licked her lips. "I guess," she said. When she lowered her hands to her lap, Morgan took one and squeezed it just a little. Glancing at his profile, she couldn't tell who he was. His grip was warm and firm, so probably not Morgan. Even if it was that asshole Saul, she decided, it felt better to have someone hold her hand than to be alone with this. She suspected that Saul was supportive under his abrasive behavior.

Of course, she'd been wrong about a man before.

Still, she held onto his hand and looked at the officer.

Officer Vance was young and sandy-haired, and had a sad long face that made him look as if he belonged in a British comedy: wide blue eyes, long nose, long chin. He took out a notebook.

She told him about the messages at the office, the letter Dr. Bollings had received, the spray-paint upstairs. "I'll never forget his handwriting. And then we saw him."

"What?" His wide eyes went wider.

"He was here in the building. He cornered me and Morgan in the basement, but Afra drove him out with a gun. Then we came in here and called you."

"You didn't tell the dispatcher you'd made visual contact with the subject," said Officer Vance .

"Didn't I? I...was having kind of a delayed reaction, I guess."

"She fainted after she hung up the phone," Morgan said.

"Mrs. Griffin, did you see this man?"

"I certainly did," said Afra. "Saw and heard him. Talking trash to D.J. down the stairwell, nasty stuff, like religion only twisted."

"Can you describe him?"

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"A tall fella with a good pair of shoulders on him, at least six feet high, maybe more. He had short dark hair, thick black eyebrows, kind of a narrow face with hollows under the cheekbones. Big hands. He was wearing a green coat that covered up his other clothes, but he had leather shoes, not tennis shoes or whatever they call those things that come in those lurid shades. And he ran away right quick when he saw my gun."

"Your gun?"

Afra got her gun out of the drawer again. The officer made a note.

"Have a sniff," Afra said. "Haven't fired it since my nephew took me target shooting six years ago."

Officer Vance duly sniffed the barrel and handed the gun back to her. "Exactly why did you bring the gun out in the first place?"

"Well, I've got a responsibility to my tenants. I keep track of most things that go on here. I had a very bad feeling about that young fella. He waltzed right in here without so much as a by-your-leave, climbed the stairs, came clattering back down, headed for the basement just like he knew where it was. I don't know. My alarms just went off."

"Do you pull your gun often?"

"First time since about three years ago. There was a squabble in one of the apartments. A man was whaling on his wife, and she was screaming. I called the police, but they didn't come fast enough to suit me, so I went up there and showed him my gun and told him to git. Which he did. And of course she got right after him; they left together the next week." She looked at the policeman. "It's not like I wave this thing around promiscuously. Just when I need to."

"I see," he said drily. "All right, I think I'm ready to go look at the apartment."

Morgan stood and tugged D.J. to her feet. "Ready for this?" he whispered. He wore Saul's sneer again.

She felt angry. She wasn't sure Morgan could control his ghosts, but she thought, from what Clift had said earlier, that Morgan had some say in who was acting. Why was he siccing Saul on her? Clift, Gary, Morgan, any of the rest of them would have been better, even Mishka or Shadow.

Saul's smile widened. "Yeah, give it to me, baby," he whispered, his hand squeezing hers with steady on-and-off pressure, thumb pressing into her palm, a stand-in for sex, his leer told her.

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"Not now!" she muttered, jerking her hand out of his and stalking around the table to the door. She led the officer and Afra and Morgan upstairs, then fumbled for her key, realized she had left her purse in the basement, had dropped it when she grabbed the mop. "Damn," she said.

Morgan reached past her and tried the doorknob. It turned and the door opened.

"Okay. From now on, don't touch anything else, all right?" said Officer Vance.

Maybe there had been a perfect print on the doorknob, D.J. thought. Damn. She led Vance in and pointed to the red spraypaint. The message was still there. For a moment she had been afraid that it had disappeared and Vance would think the whole thing was some kind of moronic stunt. But it was still there: "Only you can purify me. Only through your blood will I be saved." Chase's sprawling bold "O"s and "I" pegged the phrases down.

"What does it mean to you, Ms. Hand?" Vance asked.

"I — " Chase had a magic chant that came out of him when the lovemaking was at its most intense. D.J. had never had a traditional religious upbringing, so she wasn't sure exactly what the chant meant. When he said it she was usually pretty far gone into her own sensations, but now she remembered it: "You are my redemption, you are my savior, you renew me and cleanse me, through you I find the kingdom of heaven and I am born AGAIN, oh, oh, wash my sins away...."

Later she had thought about it even though she didn't want to. It reminded her of movies about the Catholic church: confession, then penance and — absolution, was it? Chase had never confessed to anyone; but maybe he knew he'd done something wrong. Maybe he thought of D.J. as a cure for his badness.

It had taken her more than a year to get over the nauseated feeling she got every time someone expressed even the slightest sexual interest in her.

"I think it means he wants to kill me," D.J. said in a thin voice. "He never used to think about me as the — the sacrifice, but I betrayed him.... I helped them put him away...."

Saul slipped his arm around her and pulled her up against him. She glared at him, her best melt-butter-at-five-paces sizzler, and he grinned and winked at her.

Dimly she realized that she was never nauseated by Saul or even scared

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of him. Only furious. She dug her elbow into his side, and he relaxed his grip but didn't let go of her. "I helped them put him away," she said in a stronger voice, anger underlying it. "And he should have stayed there. How did he get out?"

"I can't go into detail," said Vance. "But he did escape. He's considered armed and extremely dangerous. Since he's found you here, it might be best if we took you into protective custody."

"Yes," said Morgan, in Gary's voice.

"I'm packed and ready," said D.J. She frowned. "Does this mean I can't go to work?"

"He knows where you work."

"Oh, yeah. Damn! I'll have to call my boss."

Officer Vance said, "Is there anything else you can tell me about his habits that might lead us to him?"

"He drives a Volkswagen bug," said Saul. "We heard it leaving after Afra chased him off."

Vance's eyes narrowed. He studied Morgan for a moment, then shrugged. "Thanks." He turned to D.J. "Let's get your things."

"They're in the basement."

They left the apartment and headed downstairs again, Vance leading the way, followed by Afra, Morgan and D.J. in the rear.

D.J. caught Morgan's arm and slowed him, letting the others get ahead of them. "How come you guys have been letting Saul maul me?" she whispered.

"He makes you mad, and that's better than scared," muttered Clift.

"Prick!" she whispered.

For a second, Clift looked wounded, but then Saul came back, with his nasty grin. "Hey, baby," he murmured, "I know this body ain't much to look at, but I got techniques that could keep you happy."

She felt heat in her cheeks.

"You look great in red," he whispered and laid his hand on her blush.

For a hot furious second she glared at him without moving away. Then something inside her crumbled and she stepped closer, putting her arms around him, pressing her face into his chest. He was crazy. He was haunted. He was probably very bad for her. Maybe she was really bad for him. Morgan was confused enough as it was without some kind of love life.

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And yet. In the midst of this crashing chaos, with whatever fragile recovery she'd made since leaving Chase threatening to tear apart, here was wavery Morgan, standing as stable as he could. Even Saul was comforting, in a perverse way. And almost exciting. Which made her want to turn in her enlightened woman's card and hide her face from anybody with self-respect.

"Hon," murmured a woman's voice, tinted with a slight Southern accent and higher than the female voice D.J. had heard from Morgan before, "we can do this later. Maybe we should try not to be too weird right now."

She let go of him and rubbed her eyes. "I — I feel mixed up."

"No wonder. I'm a bit of a blender myself, hon; can't imagine how I'd feel meeting somebody like us, but having that piled on top of this other — " Morgan pursed his lips and looked down toward the front hall, where Afra and Vance stood looking up. "Come on. Sort it out later."

D.J. took his hand and headed down the stairs.

Four

"THEY'RE MONITORING everything. They said this call's okay, since I'm still at the police station. Officer Vance says if you can bring a dictaphone and the tapes and a computer to the station, they can get them to me. I don't know. You might just want to hire a temp." D.J. paused for breath.

Dr. Bollings said, "I think that would probably be best. How are you holding up?"

"Not too well," said D.J. She stared down at her lap. She was still wearing her office clothes, turquoise and silver shirt, black skirt, dark stockings, black flats. Usually the first thing she did when she got home from work was change into jeans and a big loose shirt. "And — Doc, I did something really stupid." She hesitated.

"Yes?" said Dr. Bollings.

"I made a date with one of Dr. Kabukin's patients. He said he checked it with her, but he told me later that was a lie."

"Oh, Dorothy Jean!"

"I realize it was stupid and probably a violation of office policy."

"Absolutely. But I don't know if we've ever articulated that policy. Tacit understanding isn't the same as something written down." Silence.

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"Which patient?"

D.J. squeezed her eyes shut. "Morgan," she said in a small voice. Of all Dara Kabukin's patients, Morgan was probably the most obviously askew.

A sigh.

D.J. looked up. Around her the business of the police station went on, people working at desks, some bringing people in, others answering phones, leaving, talking with each other. No one was paying any attention to her. She stared at her skirt, at the black pleats. "Doc, I may be setting Morgan's progress back hundreds of years."

"I'll let Dara know," Dr. Bollings said in a dry voice.

"The more I know him, the more I like him," D.J. said.

"For now, I think your seeing Morgan is contraindicated, at least until Dara has had a chance to meet with him and assess the effects of these developments."

"I don't think I get to see anybody anyway," said D.J. "I'll try to call you again in a couple of days, if it's okay with the police."

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" Dr. Bollings asked.

"Just — " D.J. picked at the pleats in her skirt, staring down, trying to think. She couldn't think of anyone she wanted contacted, certainly not her mother; Afra knew, Gary knew; her other friends, people she had met at community choir, she didn't even know most of their last names or phone numbers. She would have to call the director and tell her she couldn't make it to rehearsal. "Tell Dr. Dara and Dr. Earl and Dr. Brad I won't be in?"

"Surely," said Dr. Bollings.

The next day crawled by. D.J. and a female detective named Rae stayed in a cheap hotel, where the odor of cigarette smoke clung to the orange drapes and bedspreads despite wide open windows, and all the light bulbs were 40 watts.

"I hate waiting," D.J. said midway through the afternoon after numberless games of cards and Saturday morning cartoons. "Giving all my power over to him. Reacting instead of acting. Are people out there looking for him?"

"You better believe it," said Rae. "Us and the Feds."

"Have they found anything yet?"

"Nothing substantial. We're circulating pictures, asking questions,

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following leads."

Somewhat comforted, D.J. poured herself some coffee from the thermos on the dresser and sat down to play more cards.

Too restless to sleep long, D.J. was watching the 6:30 a.m. news Sunday morning with the sound down low when she heard about the attack on Afra. In a second she was shaking Rae awake, then turning up the sound. "...stabbed seven times. Mrs. Griffin was hospitalized following the midnight assault and is reported in critical condition," the newswoman's voice was saying, while the television showed a picture of the Coat of Arms Apartments building, without identifying its location. "The reason for the attack remains a mystery, but local authorities are warning residents to lock and deadbolt their doors and to be extra cautious about strangers."

D.J. felt frozen. "Why didn't you take the gun to bed with you?" she whispered. "Why wasn't somebody guarding you? Why didn't you come with me?"

Rae was on the phone, talking in a low voice, still rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. D.J. twisted one hand inside the other. She wished Gary were there, talking sense to her, the way he had during the other bad time, telling her she hadn't done anything to make Chase the way he was, that there was nothing she could have done to stop him even if she had known what he was doing, that she wasn't a horrible person just because a monster had chosen her to love. She closed her eyes and clutched her nightgown in her hands and tugged. The fabric was too strong to rip. Why hadn't she figured that he would go after Afra? Wasn't Afra the one who had foiled his last attempt at a kill? Didn't it make logical sense?

Would he go after Dr. Bollings next?

"I have to call," said D.J., surging up off her bed and going to Rae. "I have to call my boss. Maybe he's already gone after her. What about Dara. What about Morgan. I don't think he knew Morgan was there. What if he drove a little distance away and saw all of us coming out of the building? I don't even know Morgan's phone number! But Chase knows everything, he's been watching, maybe he can find Morgan. I don't know where Morgan lives. He killed Gary and Gary was a cop. Gary couldn't stop him. He tortured Gary. He might torture Morgan. Then Gary would have to go through that twice and everybody else in Morgan and Morgan — "

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Rae shook her shoulders. "Get a grip, D.J."

D.J. blinked and said, "I have to call Dr. Bollings."

"They've dispatched somebody to the residences of all the doctors in the office. They're all fine. We've advised Dr. Bollings and Dr. Kabukin to either leave town or come in for protection — "

"And Morgan?" How could she have gone with the police on Friday night and left Morgan to fend for himself? Even though it had been Gary who said good night to her. "Good," he had said, "now that I know you're safe, maybe I can figure something out."

"Protect yourself," she had told him.

"Oh, I will," he said. He had retrieved the baseball bat.

Tears in her eyes, D.J. had kissed Morgan/Gary good-bye, the first time she'd ever kissed Gary. During the case she had been too emotionally bruised to do anything besides hang onto him, and afterward she had left. Now his desperation matched hers. It had been hard to let go of him.

Yes, if Chase had only driven a little ways away, and had turned back to see that embrace, he would be gunning for Morgan too.

"What if he's already killed Morgan!" she cried, pulling on her hair.

"Shh," said Rae. "Round him up, okay, Rifkin?" She listened, then looked at D.J. "You have an address for him?"

"No. Dr. Kabukin knows, but I don't. Yesterday was our first date."

"Boy," said Rae. "Some fun." She told the person on the other end to check with Dr. Kabukin to get a twenty on Morgan Hesch, and hung up.

D.J. twisted her nightgown. "Is Afra still alive?"

"Not dead, but still critical. Still comatose. One of the other tenants heard a shot and came down and interrupted the attack."

"A shot? Did they find the bullet?" I hope she killed him! D.J. thought.

"Yeah. Lodged in a wall. It may have nicked him; the lab results aren't in on all the blood yet."

"He didn't leave a trail, huh?"

"If he did, the paramedics messed it up getting in and getting her out of there."

"Oh, God." Still clutching at her nightgown, D.J. sat on her unmade bed.

A loud knock at the door made her jump, her heart pumping.

Rae picked up her gun and went to the door. Standing to one side, she said, "Who's there?"

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"Mitchell," said a woman's voice.

Rae opened the door and let in a short, older woman. "My relief," she said to D.J. "D.J., this is Detective Mitchell."

"You're leaving?" D.J. said, then hated herself for sounding so despairing.

"It's my day with the kid, and I have two weeks' worth of laundry to do," Rae said. "Don't worry. Livvy will take care of you."

D.J. stood up. Business mode, she thought, and held out her hand. "I'm sure she will. Nice to meet you, Detective."

Mitchell had a firm handshake and a no-nonsense face.

Rae dressed. "Downtown'll keep you posted on Mrs. Griffin's progress." Rae picked up a paper sack of her things, shook hands with D.J., and ducked out the door.

Sunday after Rae left was pure hell. By six p.m. D.J. wanted to strangle Mitchell, who was close-mouthed and mean and seemed to resent looking after D.J. D.J. said, "Come on. You can at least tell me if Morgan's alive or dead."

After fifteen minutes of silence, Mitchell sighed. "They picked him up. He's all right. They've got him in protective custody down at the jail."

"Couldn't he come here?"

"Jail's for his own protection. He's crazy as a bedbug."

Crazy? D.J. felt blank. Then she remembered how Timmy liked to sneak up behind the divider at the office, then leap up with a loud boo and revel in her screams. How sometimes Mishka just sat and sobbed, not even knowing what to do with the tissues D.J. offered her. How Shadow, sounding like an old radio show, was prone to making dark and esoteric pronouncements that didn't make sense once you dissected them. How even Clift could get on her nerves if he watched her too closely and commented on her every move, analyzing the way she bit a pencil or scratched her nose.

That had been before she started talking to him, though. Once they began having conversations, her belief in his craziness had evaporated.

She sighed. She guessed she should just be happy that he was safe, and that the police and the FBI were taking this seriously. After another block of television-filled, conversation-empty time, D.J. said, "Could I go to jail?"

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"There's no television in the cells, the beds aren't comfortable, and the food's much worse, but hey, if that's your pleasure, I can take you in."

"I'll pack."

Five

MORGAN HAD stubble. He looked pale, sad, and confused. The door to his cell was locked.

"Oh, Morgan!" D.J. said. She turned on Mitchell. "How come he's locked up? He's not a suspect!...Is he?"

"No. Like I told you before, it's for his own protection. If you heard the way he was talking..."

"Doro, what are you doing here?" Gary said. "I thought they had you farmed out someplace."

"Yeah, they did, but I'd rather be with you. I was going nuts wondering if you were all right."

"'Course I'm all right. I don't think it's a good idea, your being here. Chase is canny. He could get in here somehow and get you."

"Oh, yeah, Loon? Just how?" asked Mitchell.

"Pose as an informant, a delivery boy, even an officer; get pulled in for something simple like disturbing the peace; if he dyed his hair, accessorized with a mustache, eyebrows, teeth, changed his clothes, he could slip right past you people. You've got other things on your minds."

Mitchell's jaw dropped for a brief second before she closed her mouth. D.J. felt delighted.

D.J. said, "I'm not good at sitting around a room with nothing to do and no one to talk to. Officer Mitchell was with me as a guard, but she's not very friendly. I thought you'd be much more entertaining."

"Undoubtedly," said Clift.

"I could come with you to wherever it was you were," Gary said.

"Officer Mitchell doesn't think so. She says she couldn't keep you under control. How come you convinced everybody here you were crazy?"

"Morgan doesn't coordinate well when he's wakened from a sound sleep," said one of the women, the one with the Southern accent. "I had to do the initial talking, and for some reason that spooked them." Morgan's face smiled. It was another new expression, self-contained and narrow.

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It reminded D.J. of a cat.

"Are you Valerie or Elaine?" D.J. asked.

"Valerie, sugar."

"Hi."

"Hi, honey."

"Glad to meet you," D.J. said, and Morgan got up and came to the bars, staring into her eyes. His own had a touch of green in them now. She studied them so she would know Valerie again by something other than her voice. She held out her hand. Morgan's lashes fluttered down, then opened again as he took her hand. The little cat smile widened into something friendly.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, hon," said Valerie. She kissed D.J.'s hand, then looked confused.

D.J. squeezed Morgan's hand. She thought about her talk with Dr. Bollings. "Morgan, what if I'm bad for you?"

"Deej, you're not the problem," said Clift.

"What if I'm making you sicker?"

"Oh, please!" said Saul. "You know we're not sick! In fact, I think you're the only one who knows it besides us. At least I thought you knew it. They brainwashing you, babe?"

D.J. looked away, closed her eyes. It was time to make a decision about this. Dr. Kabukin and Dr. Bollings thought Morgan had some kind of mental illness, and D.J. respected them as professionals. On the other hand, she knew Gary was real, and she felt that all the others had independent existences, too. Time to believe in herself again instead of the experts, after these torturous years of doubting everything she had ever known. She opened her eyes and stared up at Saul. "No," she said, baring her teeth in a nasty grin at him and pinching his cheek. "I know you're not crazy."

"What a load of bullshit!" said Mitchell. "I ought to lock you up for being crazy too!"

"Hey, Morgan, you want to go to a hotel with me?" D.J. said.

His eyes lit up. "Miss Deej!" he said, himself at last. "You're teasing."

"No. All you have to do is prove to Officer Mitchell that you'll, uh, cooperate, not wander off, obey orders. Not get us in danger."

"There's no way he can prove that to my satisfaction," said Mitchell.

D.J. frowned, wondering if Mitchell had enough power to make decisions about her and Morgan. Business mode, she thought. I put on my persona, I

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know where everything goes, I am unfailingly polite, organized, relaxed, I can follow the chain of command, I know how to find out what I need to know. I get things done. Business mode. Even though, in her relaxed clothes, Reeboks, jeans, and a big black T-shirt, she wasn't dressed for it. "Who's your superior? Who assigns the duties around here?"

Mitchell snorted. "On a Sunday evening? Good luck."

"Excuse me, Morgan," D.J. said, and wandered out into the main room of the station. "Somebody in charge here?" There were a lot fewer people in the station than there had been Friday night. She headed for the front desk. "Sergeant?"

"Yes?"

"Hi. I'm D.J. Demain. I've got somebody assigned to protect me while this guy, Chase Kennedy, is trying to kill me. Mitchell, the woman who's guarding me, isn't — I just wondered if there was anybody else you could assign?"

He smiled at her and said, "Pleasant isn't in the job description for guarding witnesses, Miss Demain."

"You're right. What I'd really like is for me and my friend Morgan to go underground in a hotel, but Mitchell doesn't think she can handle him. Is self-confidence in the job description?"

"She scared of that skinny guy?" he said.

"Well, he talks in strange voices."

He looked at her for a while, then glanced around the room. "Hey, Harley, you doing anything specific tonight?"

A man in plain clothes who had his feet up on a desk and a *True Romance* in his hands glanced up. "Waiting for anything that might develop," he said. He was a large man with thinning brown hair. He looked sleepy.

"You want to watch a couple of witnesses overnight?"

"They going to do anything interesting?"

The desk sergeant looked at D.J. and raised his eyebrows.

"It's our second date," D.J. said to Harley. "I sometimes go all the way on a second date."

"I'm game," Harley said, lowering his feet and rising. He was taller than D.J. had thought; his clothes were sloppy yet suitable — a biscuit-brown suit, a half-untucked white shirt, a medium-width red tie loosened at the neck. He folded his magazine, tucked it into his inside jacket pocket, and ambled over.

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"Hello," he said.

"Hello," said D.J., holding out her hand. "D.J. Demain."

"Just call me Harley. I don't tell anybody my first name." His handshake was enveloping but gentle.

"My friend Morgan is locked up. He's the other witness. Could somebody let him out?"

The sergeant handed some keys over to Harley, and D.J. and Harley headed for the jail cells. "You're with the kook?"

"Mm," said D.J., nodding.

"This does sound entertaining."

Morgan was in a far corner of his cell, curled up nose to knees, and Mitchell was standing close to the bars, glaring at him.

D.J. said, "Hey, Morgan, look what I found! It's Harley. He's taking us to a hotel now."

Morgan scrubbed a hand over his face and unfolded.

"What?" said Mitchell, outraged.

Harley unlocked the door, and Morgan came over, eyes wide.

"Hi, Morgan," said Harley, holding out his hand.

"Hi, Harley." Gary was the one who answered. He grinned and shook hands. "You got any shaving gear? I'm starting to irritate myself."

"We could stop at a twenty-four-hour market on the way over, if you two will crouch down in the back seat while I go in and make the buy."

"No problem," said Gary.

"Either of you have any money?"

"I do," said D.J. She opened her purse and fished out thirty dollars. She handed him the bills.

"Hot damn! We could pick up some doughnuts and hot coffee. Make a shopping list, kids. Let's go."

"Harley, you haven't seen what I've seen," Mitchell said.

"I'm sure that's true," said Harley. "What are you talking about?"

"He's possessed."

"Morgan?" Harley said. "Any truth to the rumor?"

"Yeah," said Gary.

"Demons?"

"No. Ghosts."

"None of them is the Devil?"

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"Nope. Just normal people."

"Good. Because that Satanic cult stuff gets on my nerves. If you started chanting in tongues and spewing pea soup I might have to get rough."

"Nothing like that," said Gary.

"Good. Let's go."

Harley made them wait in the stairwell with their luggage while he checked the parking garage. He made them duck down in the back seat before he drove out of the parking garage into the street. "It's likely he saw you come in, D.J.," he said. "Or at least possible. Let's not take any stupid chances."

"Fine with me," said D.J., lying down on the back seat with her head near Morgan's. She was just glad that Harley drove a large American car with lots of leg room.

Morgan peeked at her, and Mishka began giggling.

"Who's that?" Harley said, driving. "That you, D.J.?"

"Uh," said D.J.

"Peek-a-boo," Mishka said at the same time, her voice high and sweet and bubbly. "Peek!"

Harley glanced back over the seat. Mishka hid her eyes with her hands, then pulled her hands aside and said, "Peek!"

"Eerie," said Harley.

D.J. sighed. "That's Mishka. She's three."

"A three-year-old ghost?"

"Eyoo," said D.J., who hadn't considered it like that.

"How'd she die?" Harley said.

"Morgan?" D.J. said.

Mishka's eyes clouded. Her mouth trembled. "Water," she murmured. "Wah wah."

D.J. reached out and stroked her hair. "It's okay. It's okay. Look, now you have a big old body to play in."

Mishka calmed, then disappeared. Saul's sneer showed up in her place. "Don't I, though?" he said, and leered at her.

"Not as big as Harley's," said D.J.

"Low blow, babe."

She smirked at him.

"So who's this one?" Harley asked.

"Saul. Some punk from Jersey." D.J. stuck her tongue out at him.

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"Give it to me, baby," said Saul.

"Shut up." She said it lazily, her previous instant fury with anything Saul said gone.

He shrugged and smiled.

"How many are there?" Harley asked.

D.J. tried to count in her head. "Eight?" she asked Morgan.

"Think so," he said in his own voice. "Plus me."

"So who's that?"

"That's really Morgan," D.J. said

"Whom did I meet in jail?"

"Listen carefully, Buford," said Gary. "Take a wild guess."

The car jerked. The wheels squealed. The car continued driving, though; Harley did not turn around. "No," he said in a low voice.

"Sorry to bring it up this way, Harley. Guess I should have waited till we got to the hotel."

"No," said Harley.

"All right. I'll shut up now. If you want, I don't have to talk to you anymore. Just make sure they get the bastard for me, before he gets Doro."

Without another word, Harley pulled into a parking lot. He turned the car off. After a couple minutes' silence, he said, "Stay down, you two. I'm locking you in. Don't you dare show yourselves." He got out of the car and slammed the door shut.

They lay in silence for a while. Outside the car windows, darkness lay, the edge taken off it by the big lighted sign of the supermarket. The car smelled like vinyl. D.J. realized the night was cold, and wished she had taken a jacket out of her duffel, which was safely locked in the trunk. "Morgan?" she whispered at last.

"Yeah?"

"Gary knows Harley?"

Morgan sighed. "I forgot my speech, even though Dr. Dara taught me and taught me. 'I didn't mean anything by it. Have a nice day.'"

"I don't think that would work on Harley, hon."

Morgan sighed again. Then Gary said, "I consulted with him on a case when he was working up in Seattle. Never knew he was down here now, otherwise I'd have said we should get in touch with him. We've never met face to face, but we spent hours on the phone. Just couldn't resist telling him that

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way, and I guess I should have. It seemed like such a great joke."

They lay in silence. D.J. wondered what she would do if a face appeared at the window staring down at them. What if it were Chase? She hid her face in the crook of her arm.

A key rattled in the lock, the door opened, and Harley tossed a loaded brown paper bag over the seat-back. Morgan caught it before it could land on D.J.'s head. The car engine growled to life and they were traveling again.

Harley drove erratically for a while, turning corners quickly, slowing, starting, pulling over. They even hit the freeway briefly. No one spoke.

Finally they stopped somewhere else. "Stay down," Harley said in a remote voice, leaving them again. When he came back after a little while, he dropped a key with a plastic tag on D.J.'s head. She grabbed it.

"I've gotten us two connecting rooms, just in case you kids want a little privacy for your second date," Harley said.

"Thanks," D.J. said.

"The rooms are around back where the entrances can't be seen from the road." He started the car again. After a short trip, he turned the engine off and said, "The coast is clear, kids. Let's make a break."

When D.J. tried to sit up, she discovered how stiff she was from an hour of crouching. Harley hauled their things out of the trunk and took them into a room. Morgan groaned and sat up, grabbing the grocery bag. "Do you think he hates me?" he asked.

"No," said D.J. "He's just upset."

"I don't want him to hate me. I like him."

"So do I." She peered out the window, saw that they were in a sheltered spot and she couldn't see anybody else around, just some quiet cars pulled up to anonymous doors in the anonymous dark, lit only by orange outdoor lights placed at intervals along the motel's back face.

"Come on," she said, clutching the key to room 156.

They got out and unlocked the door.

D.J. had to smile. One-fifty-six was a double double. So maybe Harley hadn't taken her absolutely seriously when she told him about its being the second date. She and Morgan had a choice.

She went and opened the connecting door, already unlocked on Harley's side. Morgan closed the room's curtains and turned on a few lamps. This motel was a step up from the one D.J. had stayed in with Rae. There was

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stationery and a Gideon Bible in the desk drawer, and the light bulbs were at least sixty watts.

From the other room came the sound of television. She knocked on the open connecting doorway and entered when Harley nodded to her.

She said, "I was wondering about Afra's condition. My landlady, Afra Griffin. She was attacked last night. Mitchell wouldn't tell me much about her."

Harley grabbed the phone and dialed, spoke quietly while D.J. leaned against the wall and looked at the television: a TV movie about an abusive husband and a passive wife, with children thrown in for plot complications. Morgan wandered in carrying a Saran-wrapped sheet of mixed doughnuts. "Want to take a shower," he said. He put the doughnuts on the table at Harley's elbow and retrieved his suitcase from where Harley had left it after unpacking the car.

"Harley's finding out about Afra," murmured D.J.

Morgan gave her a look then, his eyes dark and so wide she could see the whites all the way around the irises, his mouth hanging slightly open. A chill iced her spine: it was the first time he had really scared her. Then he blinked and looked at her from under his eyebrows, a Gary look, put an arm around her shoulders, kissed her cheek, and disappeared into their room. She stood looking after him, her hand to her cheek.

"The news is not good," Harley said as he cradled the handset.

She stared at him.

He got to his feet, walked over, and took her hands. "Come on, sit down," he said, leading her to the bed. She sat, and he sat in a chair across from her, still holding her hands. His brown eyes looked tired. "She's gone," he said gently. "Your friend is gone."

Shock stilled everything in her for a long minute. Then all her connections let loose and she collapsed backward onto the bed, her hands pulling out of his. "No," she muttered. "No."

It's all my fault. If I had never moved into her apartment, if I had never gotten to be friends with her, if Chase had just killed me when he came for me instead of Afra stopping him, maybe she'd be alive today.

Surely death and destruction shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of chaos forever. Amen.

D.J. put her hands up around her neck and squeezed her throat.

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Harley gripped her wrists and pulled her hands away. D.J. coughed.

"You didn't do it," Harley said, holding her wrists.

"It happened because of me." Her voice hurt coming out. Hot tears spilled out of her eyes, streaking down the sides of her head. A moment later she was swallowing choked sobs and trying to twist away from him. He released her and got up. She curled tight, burying her face under her forearms, crying. How could this be? Afra, watering the dahlias, whispering to her that the tenants in 2D were probably going to have a baby, and wasn't it a pity, the way they fought? Afra, sniffing at science. Afra offering her Dutch cocoa on a rainy winter night. D.J. remembered a constellation of photographs in driftwood frames, laughing young men and women, babies, children, that had sat among conch shells on Afra's piano: relatives. Sons? Daughters? Grandchildren? All bereft now. And no chance for her, for any of them, to say goodbye.

"It should have been me," she whispered. She didn't have anybody who'd remember her, except a mother who didn't know whether she was alive or dead anyway, and a ghost.

"It shouldn't have been anybody!" Harley yelled. "Get it through your head! It shouldn't happen at all, but it is happening, and you can't control it! The only one who can control it is Kennedy, until we catch him, and don't you think we blame ourselves — don't you think we know it's our fault that he got away in the first place and that he's getting away with this now?" His face was red with rage.

D.J. rubbed her eyes until she saw purple stars, then looked up at him and detached herself from within. He's upset, she thought. Do I need to be upset now? Maybe I should save it for later. She crushed her anguish down and let control filter to the fore. "I'm sorry," she said in a steady voice.

"Yes, well," said Harley, his voice stabilizing too. He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Best I can do is watch you two carefully, stop it from happening here."

"I'm going to bed now," D.J. said in a small voice.

"D.J...." He slumped in the chair. "I'm sorry. That outburst. I'm sorry. I didn't think I would — "

"It's all right," she said.

"No," he said, "but it happened. I'm sorry you lost your friend. Is there anything I can do?"

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"I don't..." She pushed herself up, managed to get to her feet. "Can't think of anything. I'm really tired."

"Yes. Leave the door open, kiddo. If you need anything in the night, give a yell."

"Okay." She stumbled into the other room. He followed a minute later, carrying her duffel, and put it on the dresser. The sound of the shower still came through the bathroom door. Harley ambled back into the other room without saying anything else, and D.J. dragged over to her duffel, pulling a nightgown and her toiletries purse out but then lying on the bed with them beside her, without the energy to do anything else.

An arm was around her. D.J. opened her eyes. The last she remembered, she had been lying on her back, but now she was curled up, her nightgown still clutched in her hands, the heat of a body at her back, the soap-clean scent of a stranger in her nose, and a strange arm resting around her, its hand flat on her stomach. Light leaked from the bathroom; all the other lights in the room were out. She glanced down at the arm, saw it was a man's, naked, thin but sinewy, with a growth of fine black hairs on it. She lay for a while staring straight ahead at the wallpaper, which had a faint rick-rack pattern, brown on beige. It came to her that Afra was dead. A black knot twisted her stomach, and hot tears seeped from her eyes. She let go of the nightgown and put one hand on Morgan's hand on her stomach. He murmured something and pressed up against her back, digging his chin into her shoulder. Suddenly she wanted to be held more than anything else. She lifted his hand and rolled over to face him. He had shaved. His eyes were closed, and his slow breath flickered the ends of his mustache.

"Valerie?" she murmured. "Valerie?"

After a moment his eyes opened. It was too dark for her to see their color. "Hon?" murmured Valerie.

"Could you hold me, please?"

Valerie stretched and yawned, patting her mouth as she did. Morgan was wearing a pair of jockey shorts, nothing else. He looked more muscular naked than he ever had inside his clothes. Valerie put her arms around D.J., stroking her back in soothing circles.

D.J. closed her eyes and relaxed, curled against Morgan's front. After a long moment, she said, "Afra's dead."

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"I know, sugar. I know." The massage was smooth, calming. D.J. drifted back to sleep.

Daylight was sifting through the curtains. D.J. woke up feeling sticky. Her mouth tasted like moldy cheese. Morgan was asleep. D.J. slid out of his arms, grabbed her purse, and went into the bathroom.

She felt much better after a shower, deodorant, baby powder, and teeth brushing. She was ready to eat something, anything. She wondered if Harley had eaten all dozen doughnuts in the night. After sliding into her sweaty T-shirt, she sneaked back out and ransacked her duffel for other clothes, then retreated to the bathroom again, glancing at Morgan before she shut the door. She stopped when she realized his eyes were open and he was looking at her.

"Pasty," said a new voice coming from his mouth.

"What?" D.J. straightened. She clapped a hand over her mouth, felt her eyes going wide.

Morgan struggled up on his elbows. He squinched his face up, then relaxed it into a frown.

"Too soon," said Clift, rumbling a little. "Way too soon." Evidently he wasn't good at mornings. He waved a limp hand at D.J. "Go get dressed."

D.J. ducked into the bathroom and dressed slowly. The new voice. Familiar.

Afra's.

Six

"MORGAN?" SHE said when she came out of the bathroom. She had picked one of her dresses to wear today, a crush-proof comfortable polyester number in burgundy.

Morgan had pulled on jeans and had his head bent forward, brushing his hair down over his face. "What?" asked the Lauren Bacall voice from beneath the hair.

"Elaine?" said D.J., sitting on the bed beside Morgan. The voice wasn't Valerie's; it sounded deeper, devoid of accent, and smokier.

"Mm-hmm," said the Lauren Bacall voice. "I'm the hygiene nut." She tossed her head back and brushed the hair out of her face. "You should have seen this boy before I got here. Talk about socially unacceptable!"

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"Does he like it, that you — take care of him?"

"'Course! He's grateful. He's not stupid, you know; he realizes that this kind of maintenance makes people accept him more. Nobody else ever taught him these things. Mostly his mother just left him in the basement and told him not to make any noise." She finished brushing. "Got a rubber band, sis?"

D.J. searched through the purse Morgan had filled with her bathroom supplies, found the pouch with hair things in it. D.J. wore short permed hair at the moment, but she had had her long hair days, too, until she got tired of having to deal with it all the time. She handed Elaine a braided elastic loop, and Elaine twisted it around Morgan's long black hair, making a ponytail down the back.

"Normally he likes the jungle look, so he can hide behind his hair if the moment demands it. But I think we can do without that today," Elaine said.

Harley stood on the threshold of their room and knocked on the door sill. "Decent?" he said.

Morgan's lip lifted in Saul's sneer, but he didn't say anything out loud.

"Come on in," D.J. said. "I'm starving."

Morgan looked through his suitcase and pulled out a white shirt with billowy sleeves, like the shirts pirates wore in Errol Flynn movies. "Eh?" Saul said, as he held the shirt up to his chest, lifting one of the sleeves, shaking the lace-edged ruffled cuff at her.

"Who does your shopping?" asked D.J.

"It's a constant battle," Saul said. "Mostly we shop in thrift stores, so we can get a piece of clothing for each of us." He slipped the shirt on over his head. "I don't think our style makes us popular at parties. The bits don't go together."

"Does that voice trick work for you or against you?" Harley asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You could put it all together into some kind of act, if you had a writer. It's uncanny how different your voices are."

"That's what I thought," Afra said. "Lots of potential."

D.J.'s face prickled and her fingers tingled.

"Shut up," said Clift. "Not yet." He sat down on the bed next to D.J. "You're pale. We're sorry, Deej. I know it's a shock. It's a shock to us too, every time this happens. We haven't settled in yet."

D.J. gripped a fold of her dress, staring down at the material. "There's

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some kind of selection process, isn't there? I mean, not every single person who dies comes and gets inside you, only special ones — otherwise you'd be legion, right? You have ghosts from all over the states! How do you pick them?"

"I suspect a prerequisite for it is that we have to believe in ghosts, one way or another, to become them," Clift said. "Another thing that distinguishes us from garden variety ghosts is that we are impregnated with some sense of mission, at least initially. Violent death seems to have quite a bit to do with it. Then there's resonance. Morgan isn't the only ghost magnet in the world, but he emits a certain resonance that appeals to a select few, namely those of us here. In effect, there's quite a strict entrance exam."

She twisted her dress between her hands. "Does Morgan have any say about this?"

"I want her," Morgan said. He patted D.J.'s shoulder. "I like her. She's real nice. You want her to go away, Miss Deej?"

"No, of course not," she said, turning to look at him through a glaze of tears. "I can't quite understand it yet, but I'm glad she's here. But I just worry about you, Morgan. It must be so crowded inside you."

"I have all these friends to talk to," he said.

"But what if they all want to talk at once?"

"I tried to introduce us to Robert's Rules of Order, but the others say that's silly," Clift said. "If we didn't like each other, this would be a nightmare. However, I admire all of us."

"Even Saul?"

"Oh, yes. He's a pain in the butt, but he doesn't mean anything by it. He has certain strengths the rest of us don't."

Harley vanished into his room and returned with half a dozen doughnuts, which he offered to D.J. and Morgan. D.J. grabbed three cake doughnuts. Morgan took one glazed twist.

"Aren't you, like, eating for twelve?" Harley asked Morgan.

"Most of us don't care for sweets," said Clift. "This is for Gary."

"Oh, God," Harley said, sitting down at the table. "Gary." He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. "I think I better get this straight now. D.J., you buy this whole ghost-possession thing?"

"Yes," mumbled D.J. around a mouthful of doughnut.

"Even though it makes no sense."

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"I don't think I can explain it any other way. Besides, Gary — "

"Gary?"

"I knew Gary in San Francisco, Harley. He says he consulted with you on a case while you were in Seattle. Were you in Seattle before you came to Spores Ferry?"

"Oh, God," said Harley.

"How could he know that if he wasn't Gary?"

"Maybe he's psychic."

"You accept psychic but you don't believe in spooks?"

"I don't know what I believe." He stared at Morgan. "Gary?"

"Buford?"

Harley cringed. "Don't call me that!"

"Heh heh heh." Gary wolfed his doughnut. "Okay, Harley."

"You used to be a sensible guy," Harley said after a pause. "How...the hell...are you surviving this? Surviving. Is that the word? If that *is* you in there, isn't it driving you crazy?"

Gary frowned and stared at the rug. After a long silence, he said, "I woke up." He glanced at Harley. "You know how I died?"

"Heard," said Harley.

Gary looked at D.J., then shrugged. "I never wanted to feel anything again. The sleep was such a relief. I think I stayed in it for a while. Fact, Clift tells me I was gone, nowhere, null, a couple weeks, before I woke up.

"Probably the last thing I was thinking about besides pain was Doro. I knew the boyfriend was looking for her, and I had aimed him right at her. I opened my eyes, and there she was. There you were," he said, looking at D.J., "at least the top of your head, over that wall. Hair color and style changed, but then you looked up, and there were those eyes. Never forget 'em."

She stared at him, a trembling smile surfacing.

"I couldn't figure out how that happened. Which was the dream? Death, or waking up? Then all these people started talking to me, all these strangers, big blonde woman, little baby girl, professor type, black kid, a whole bunch of them, saying, 'Settle down! Settle down, brother, let us explain.'"

He sat still for a while, staring toward the curtains, then frowned and glanced down at his hands. "Well, it was one wild explanation. But you know...." He looked up at Harley, smiled. "It's nice in here. Never been close to so many people. I was a loner before, and I thought this was my worst

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nightmare, but actually — "

Harley shuddered. "More power to you."

Gary burst out laughing, leaned against D.J. She smiled, finding his joy infectious.

"Know what?" Gary said when he had stopped laughing. "I can't even buy a beer."

Harley frowned. "Do you want one?"

"Not especially. It just strikes me as — " He shook his head, smiling. "And voting. Boy. Can't wait to see how we handle that. And registering for selective service?" He frowned. "We do that yet?" He listened to something D.J. and Harley couldn't hear. "Oh, of course, we'd qualify for an exemption." He shook his head. "Kid's been in therapy for three years already and he's only nineteen. Nobody gets a normal adolescence."

"Cut to the chase," Clift said.

"Sorry," said Gary. "Right. The point is to stop the boyfriend."

"Already a lot of people working on that."

"We have certain resources they don't have."

"Like what?"

Morgan drew in a deep breath, sat up straight, licked his lips. Afra said, her voice tight with pain, "My name is Afra Griffin. He came to my apartment."

Harley's eyes went wide. He hunched his shoulders.

"His hair was different. Blond. It was the middle of the night, and I was asleep. I had my gun on the bedside table, on a shelf you couldn't see without being in the bed. He didn't know. He taped my mouth. He tied me...." She glanced at D.J., stopped. She looked at Harley. "Gary said it was his standard M.O. They probably told you all that. I got a hand free, but by that time he, well, I couldn't aim as well as I used to. Shot him in the arm. Right forearm. Stopped him. He had to go tie a bandage around it, and then noise came from upstairs. Shot woke up the Lutzes. So he scampered out of there."

Her eyes closed, and her face tightened, as if suddenly Morgan were all cheekbone and temple. She opened her eyes. "He asked me things at first. Where D.J. was. He'd rip the tape up off my mouth so I could answer, then put it down again. I told him you went with the police. Then, when I didn't have any more answers, then, he just...."

She shook herself. "Here's what I remember. He was wearing gray pants,

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a white shirt, red suspenders. He had bleached his hair platinum blond since the day before. By the time he left, his shirt was bloody and his pants were too. So he would have had to change them, either dump them or clean them. He had a big army overcoat he took off before he started on me, and he wrapped up in it before he ran away. I heard that beetle noise, like Saul said. VW Bug. So. You're looking for a blond who drives a VW and wears a full-length army jacket, olive drab. He's got a gunshot wound in his right forearm."

"I'll phone that in."

Gary said, "What are you going to tell them when they ask where you got the information?"

"A witness." Harley struggled to his feet. "Don't worry. I can make this fly somehow. I'll be right back."

D.J. turned to look at Morgan, took his hands.

"You told me he did impressions," Afra said, and smiled.

"That sounds more believable than the reality, doesn't it?"

Afra rolled her eyes, something D.J. had seen her do a dozen times in her previous incarnation. It meant what a world, what a world. She said, "You see, I've been telling them Harley's right. We could put an act together, if we had the right script. Did I ever tell you I used to be in the theater?"

"You never did," said D.J.

"Morgan doesn't know what he wants to do when he grows up," Afra said. "From what he tells me, he's just sampling various classes in school. I think we have a future in stand-up, but I haven't convinced any of the others."

"A bit too public for my palate, sugar," said Valerie, distaste in her voice. "I would vastly prefer it if we just kept our little oddities to ourselves."

"Yes, but we never do," said Clift.

"That's because of Timmy and Saul," Valerie said. She wrinkled her nose. "I wish those boys would observe a few civil niceties. And you, Cliffie, have the lecture habit."

"I don't think I could give it up if I tried, Val."

"Oh, I don't know," Valerie said in a considering voice. "I just think we haven't found the proper motivation yet."

Harley wandered back in. "Well, they took notes when I talked to them. Seems like they think insanity is contagious, and that I caught it from you, Morgan. Somebody'll be along soon with some real breakfast, D.J."

"Good," she said, her stomach chiming in with a rumble, even though

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she had tried to quiet it with the doughnuts. "I forgot to get any dinner yesterday."

"McNamara will bring us something good. Wonder what's on TV." He went toward the television and D.J. had a terrible sense of déjà vu: watching the news Sunday morning, hearing about the attack on Afra. What if the news this morning brought more evil? Whom had she forgotten to protect this time?

"Don't," she said in a little swallowed voice. And not only that, but right after the television announcement, Rae had disappeared. "Harley!" she cried. "Are you going to leave us too?"

"What?" he said.

"Like Rae. Yesterday. Suddenly someone came along and relieved her. I know you shouldn't have to work twenty-four hour days or anything, but I just..."

"Oh, that? No, I told downtown I'd stick with you, at least for the next two days. I may need a little time off now and then. Couple hours to go feed the cat, collect the mail. But I figured nobody else is going to make the adjustment I did."

"Meaning me?" Gary asked.

"Yeah. I still don't quite believe in you, but I do give you credibility. I think other people could easily make a mistake about you."

"They do all the time," Clift said.

Harley nodded, frowning. He looked at the television, now in reach, then glanced at D.J. "You don't want me to turn it on?"

"I don't want to hear that there's been another attack."

"I've already talked to downtown today, and they would have told me. Let's just check in with one of the morning programs. I need a news fix."

"Okay," said D.J. She looked at Morgan. "Any of you play cards?"

"I know one called Misery," said the Shadow's deep echoey voice.

"You'll have to teach me," D.J. said. She had never had an extended conversation with the Shadow. She wondered how he had died, who he had been. He couldn't really be an old radio play character, could he? Getting to know Morgan would take a lot of time and work.

"With great pleasure," the Shadow said.

"So which one's that?" asked Harley, glancing away from Regis & Kathie Lee.

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"Shadow," D.J. said, as the Shadow geared up and produced his long spooky laugh that started at a medium pitch and sank down into very low registers.

Harley made a face as if he had smelled something bad.

"Oh, come on," said D.J. "He's just a kid. How old are you, Shadow?"

He glared at her. "Sixteen." It was the first time she had heard him say something in a normal voice. He sounded sullen and young.

"You can sound scary if that's what you want," she said. "How do we play Misery?" She retrieved Rae's cards from her luggage and began shuffling.

"Deal thirteen to each," he said in his spookiest voice.

They were playing their second hand when a knock came on the door of Harley's room. Harley switched off the television, reached for his gun, and eased to the connecting door. "Who's there?"

"Breakfast," said a voice through the door.

Panic started in D.J.'s chest and spread through her like fire feeding on lines of oil. She stared at Morgan. Morgan laid his cards down and looked out from under his brows.

"Don't open the door," D.J. whispered to Harley. Morgan was on his feet, carrying his body with a focus and intensity foreign to him. "It's him."

Seven

D.J. CREPT ACROSS the bed and picked up the phone. She felt as if she had swallowed a stone, and it lay in her stomach, pinning her down. She could not escape. Why even think of it?

Calm, she was calm. She had Things to Do. She dialed 911. Morgan walked silently to the outside door of their room. He gripped the knob.

"Breakfast?" said Harley in a sleepy voice. "I didn't order any breakfast. You sure you got the right room?"

"Ambulance, fire, or police?" said a voice in D.J.'s ear.

"Police," she whispered. She realized that she didn't even know what hotel they were in, or the address, having come in blind the night before. She grabbed an ashtray off the bedside table and fished the matchbook out of it. "I'm D.J. Demain, a protected witness, here with Morgan Hesch and Detective Harley." She studied the matchbook. "We're at the Lamplighter Inn,

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1342 Benjamin Boulevard, and Chase Kennedy, the escaped murderer, is trying to get into our room. Room 154, around the back. Please send help." She cradled the phone silently.

Morgan was watching Harley for a cue. Chase's voice said, "Room 154, that was my instruction from Detective McNamara." Chase sounded honestly confused. "But I'll leave if you want me to."

D.J. felt cold. Chase knew the detective's name. Had he killed him? How else would he know where to come? If he had done something to the detective, he probably had the police car, the gun, the radio...he had found her job, and her apartment. There was no escape. She closed her eyes and shivered. She remembered this kind of cold from before, the Arctic place she had gone when she realized Chase was who he was and she had made all these wrong assumptions, when she had learned she could never trust herself again. She had lived with this cold for a long time before anger thawed her out. Maybe this brief tropical period had been an illusion.

"Wait a sec," said Harley, his voice still sleepy. "What kind of breakfast you got?"

Morgan whispered, "Doro, get in the bathroom and lock the door."

She stared at him. How could she leave him alone out here with Harley and Chase? How could any of them be here? What if Chase did something awful, shot Morgan and Harley? There was no escape.

She felt so cold...

Maybe she could stop Chase somehow. It had happened before. She had to remember that. Maybe if she wasn't out here Morgan and Harley would both die and Chase would get away. Again. More deaths on her head. No, she couldn't stand that. Not again.

Anger sparked somewhere inside. She could fight. She could go down fighting.

"Do it," Morgan/Gary whispered.

She didn't have any special defense training, and she knew she wasn't as strong as Chase physically. Much as she hated to admit it, she could help Morgan and Harley best by being out of the way and as safe as possible. She scooted into the bathroom and locked the door, then looked through her toiletries purse for weapons. A perfume bottle. She could spritz that in Chase's eyes if he somehow got through the door. Baby powder. Throw it in his face. Cold cream: squirt it on the floor in front of the door and make it

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slippery? She did it, spreading the pale goop with her hands. She lined up the rest of her arsenal on the counter, then worked the towel bar out of its holders. Whatever else happened, she wanted to take a big swipe at him, break his nose at least, his head at best, his balls.

She sat on the closed toilet, the towel bar over one shoulder, and listened. Anger burned slow and steady.

What happens if I die? Morgan wondered. Gary had the body; they all thought that was best; nobody was going to argue at a time like this. Gary had faced situations like this before. He was tense but relaxed.

If I die, Morgan thought, we all die. He thought about each of his insiders, all their differences, all their samenesses; how Mishka loved ice cream and Elaine hated it, but put up with it for Mishka's sake; how Timmy taught the rest of them to play hopscotch, which a few could remember from grade school days but most had forgotten; how Valerie loved wind and wanted to run out into the middle of it any time it was blowing; how Afra knew the names of every flower, and the Shadow the names of every comic book hero; how Saul was hot for anything female, but usually wilted if any of them gave him a second look; how Clift liked to confuse people who thought Morgan was stupid by being smarter than they could ever be; how Gary liked to laugh, so deep it felt like it came from his toes.

He couldn't die. He barely even knew Afra and Gary yet. Where would all the insiders go if they lost him?

Gary clenched his jaw, feeling fire sear through his muscles. He wanted to kill Chase, stamp him out, crush him. He wanted to whip welts into him, smash his head between two rocks and destroy that corrupted brain. He drew in long draughts of breath, trying to calm himself, but it was difficult: hadn't he come back just to do this one thing? What else was there? His goal was just the other side of a door. All he had to do was open the door and grab.

"Maybe, if it's a real good breakfast, I'll open the door," Harley said. "I guess I am kind of hungry."

"Sorry. Just McDonald's, but there's a lot."

"Sounds great," said Harley. "What's the password?"

"Password?"

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"Yeah, you know, there's always a password."

"The password is — " The sound of a shot.

"Go!" yelled Harley to Gary, backing into room 156 and slamming the connecting door shut, locking it. Gary opened the outside door, glanced out, stood back as Harley took a look out. Then Harley, gun in hand, ran past Gary.

Peering around the doorsill into Room 154, gun aimed in, Harley said, "Drop it."

A shot answered him, smashing into his car where it stood parked in front of the door. Harley fired an answering shot and ducked back. Two more wild shots sounded from Room 154, with no provocation. "Lucky he favors knives," Harley muttered to Gary. "No aim. Get me a pillow."

Gary opened and closed his fists, then, blowing out breath, went to get a pillow.

A head poked out of room 152. Harley gestured the man away, hoping he would take the hint and hoof it out of range. He glanced behind him, saw someone else peering out. He flashed his badge and the person ducked out of sight.

Gary handed him a pillow. Harley held it out in front of 154's open door, attracting two more shots.

Harley jerked the pillow back, whispered to Gary, "Sound like a service revolver?"

"Uh-huh."

"Six shots. With the one he used to shoot open the door, that should do it. I think Mac carried a revolver. You think he knows how to reload?"

"He always used knives," Gary said, his voice flat and harsh. He noticed the police cruiser pulled up behind Harley's. The heat inside him was making him light-headed. He was having trouble paying attention, finding it impossible to drop down into the cool, calculating mindset he had used when police work had demanded it before.

"I'm pretty sure I winged him," Harley muttered. He edged close to the door and yelled, "Throw the gun out or I'll open fire."

Sounds of movement, the skitter of a wheel on one of the beds as the furniture shifted.

"Come on," Harley said, "we have you trapped, and you're out of bullets. What are you going to do? Might as well give up."

The revolver clattered out the door to land on the concrete

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walkway outside.

"Okay. I'll be coming in now," said Harley. "Don't do anything foolish." He peeked around the edge of the door. The sound of a rifle cocking sent him jumping back. The rifle blast smashed the grill of his car.

Two more cruisers pulled up, lights revolving, sirens silent. Car doors opened, cops hiding behind them. "Got him trapped in room 154," Harley yelled, "but he's got a rifle. Stay out of the line of fire."

He turned to Gary. "Get D.J. out of here," he said.

Gary wanted to argue. He flexed his fists, wishing Morgan had more muscle. Gary wanted to get his hands around Chase's neck, watch as the life left his body. How could he trust Harley to get Chase, when Gary couldn't even trust himself? He had known Chase was going to kill him, but he had given Chase the information he wanted anyway. He knew he would have done anything Chase asked in the end, just to get the pain to stop.

He needed to destroy Chase. He never wanted to face that dark weak place in himself again.

"Get her out of here," Harley said again.

Gary closed his eyes. The rage was so hot inside him he couldn't think straight. "Come on," whispered Valerie, "Consider Doro. Life's more important." In the dark stage that was Morgan's mind, Valerie reached out and touched Gary's forehead. Her fingertips were cool. The red rage ran out of his soles as cool flowed from her hand. Gary took a deep breath, nodded to Harley, then went to knock on the bathroom door. "Come on, Doro, we have to run."

"Is it really you?"

"Who else? Come on!"

She opened the door a crack and looked out, towel rod at the ready. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her out the door. They ran away from the room where Chase was trapped and around the side of the building.

"Where are we going?" she demanded, still gripping the towel rod. "What are we doing? All we need is a tank. We could ram right through the building and run over him. Turn him into slime." Her breath was coming in ragged gasps and her face was bright red.

Gary said, "It's almost over. He's trapped. He's got to surrender or he's going to die." His voice was tight with residual rage. He still felt a terrible need to go back, walk into the hail of fire, and take Chase out himself.

"We can't leave now!" D.J. said.

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"We can't help, Doro. Somebody else will do it."

"What if they don't? What if he gets away again?" A tear streaked down her face. "What if it starts all over?"

He took a deep breath and let it out, then gathered her into his arms, wishing he had Valerie's healing touch, wishing Doro's arguments didn't echo his own. He could feel how stiff and tight she was, but after a long moment her shoulders eased, relaxed.

"I hope he dies," she whispered. "Can't trust prison to hold him. I don't think I could stand it if this happened again. I'd kill myself first."

"Sometimes that's not a final solution," Saul muttered.

"Shut up," Clift said. "Deej, we have to delegate this time. Lord knows *we're* used to that. We have to trust somebody else to do the job for us."

After a silent moment, she said, "I just want it to be over."

They stood quiet for a little while, and then he sighed and released her. He said, "Let's go to the motel office, get the evacuation of the other rooms in motion."

D.J. sat in the waiting area of the motel office drinking instant Sanka and trying to relax. Every time she let her mind go, she thought of Chase; legions of "what-ifs" rattled their spears, pricking her composure. Instead of thinking, she stared at her hand, watched it shake as it held the coffee cup; watched the tremoring of the dark liquid.

Morgan sat down beside her on the ratty brown couch, staring at the police officer at the motel desk. The officer had a hand-held radio, and he was talking alternately into it and the phone. Tension radiated from him.

D.J. handed Morgan her coffee cup. "Unleaded," she said.

He took a sip, grimaced.

Distant pops sounded. The officer at the desk tensed.

Morgan jerked and dropped the paper cup. Coffee spilled on the brown rug.

"Morgan?" D.J. said.

Morgan stared at her, his eyes so wide she could see the whites around the irises, his mouth open slightly.

D.J. went cold, remembering the last time he'd given her that look. She couldn't look away. He seemed frozen in position, one of his hands clutched tight on the couch's arm, the knuckles white with strain, the other hand

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biting into the couch cushion between him and D.J.

"Morgan," she whispered.

A voice came from the police radio. The officer listened, his eyes closed in concentration, shoulders hunched. Then he blew out breath and stood up. "It's over."

D.J., staring into Morgan's unblinking wild eyes, knew the officer was wrong.

EIGHT

HARLEY STAGGERED into the office and headed straight for the coffee table. He had lost his suit jacket somewhere, and sweat dripped from his forehead, patched his shirt under his arms and suspenders. After he had mixed up a cup of instant from the hot water in the big pot, he turned to D.J. and Morgan.

Morgan was leaning back on the couch, his head lax, only white slits of eyes showing. D.J. sat forward on the edge of the couch, her face chalky, her eyes dark, her hands clenched on one another.

"You don't look relieved," Harley said.

"The fight's here," she whispered, and glanced toward Morgan without turning her head.

"Shee-it!" said Harley. Clift's list of qualifications for ghost-possession came back to him: believe in ghosts; have a mission; violent death; resonate right. "They wouldn't invite him in!" he said.

"He's never waited for an invitation."

Morgan's jaw worked, made a clicking nose. His mouth closed. His eyelids fluttered, then opened, their pale blue stained with brown. "Puny," he said, his voice low and thrilling. He flexed his hands, then looked around. "Dorothy Jean! At last! You don't know what I've gone through to get to you."

"Yes, I do," she said. "Get out! Die, Chase! Just — die!"

"I already did that," he said. His face darkened. "It hurt, and not in a good way."

"Get out of Morgan!" She pulled her hands apart, made fists, and began pummeling Morgan's chest.

"Hey! Is this any way to treat the one who loves you? Although it does

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feel...so good...." He smiled at her. Suddenly she remembered one evening, before she knew much about Chase. They were having a candlelight dinner at her apartment. She had made a spectacular meal, because she was sure Chase was the one she'd been looking for all her life, and the way he responded to her had her convinced he felt the same way about her. They had finished dessert and were looking at each other. D.J.'s mind, at least, was in the bedroom, where she had covered the lampshade with a pink scarf and left some sandalwood-scented candles burning.

Chase picked up one of the candles on the dinner table and tilted it so that hot wax poured onto his palm. "Mmm," he said. "So good. So good." He slowly dripped a circle on one palm, then switched hands and dripped more wax on the other. Wondering if it was some erotic turn-on she'd never heard of, D.J. had picked up the other candle and tried dripping a drop on her own palm. At the stinging pain of the burn her hand jerked. She set the candle upright and looked at Chase with horror; he was so absorbed in what he was doing that he never noticed. She blinked. Maybe she was hypersensitive to pain. Maybe that was it.

Pretending she had to go to the bathroom, she went to her room and blew out the candles there. People did have different ideas of pleasure, she told herself, but she didn't want him practicing his brand on her.

Still, she had thought Chase was near enough to perfect not to worry about.

She stopped pounding on him. He gripped her shoulders, drew her against him. "The hair, you have to change that," he said. "It's ugly. Not like an angel's anymore. But now you're a dirty one. I forgot. Now you're a dirty one." Then he ground his mouth against hers, forced hers open and thrust his tongue in. After her first startled fury, she was going to bite down on his tongue, but Harley grabbed her from behind and pulled her out of Chase's arms.

"Gary!" Harley said. "Can't you do something?"

Chase laughed. "Invoke your little police friend," he said. "I killed him once, and I'll do it again."

"Clift?" asked D.J.

"Detective?" said a strange voice from behind them. D.J. and Harley turned.

A uniformed officer stood there. "They need you for testing," he said.

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"Something's come up," said Harley. He reached behind him, then turned to Morgan and handcuffed him. "I need to question this witness before I wrap it up. I suggest we go somewhere more private," Harley said to D.J. He turned back to the other officer. "Okay if we borrow your cruiser, just to sit in?"

The man shrugged, then held out keys. "Right there," he said, pointing a thumb over his shoulder.

"Thanks, Fletcher. This shouldn't take long." He dragged Morgan up off the couch by the handcuffs, then took him outside and pushed him into the back seat. "Sit up front, D.J.," he said, climbing into the car.

She got in beside him and looked back through the divider at Morgan. "Can't you do something?" she asked, not knowing to whom she was appealing.

"I'm trying, Deej!" cried Clift. He gulped.

"The little professor," Chase said. "I'll step on him like a bug. The sluts I shall slit from crotch to throat. I missed my chance to do that to the old lady, but now that I have another chance, I'll do it correctly. I haven't decided what to do to that pesky nine-year-old boy yet, but it's delicious to think about my options. And the baby. I don't know if she's dirty yet." He frowned. "But she will be. Maybe not right away. But after I deal with the others." He sat back and smiled. "The cop. The cop. He was so much fun the last time. I'll make it even better this time."

"Morgan!" D.J. said. "Kick him out. Kick him out."

Morgan blinked, then looked at her with his own pale blue eyes. "Kick him out?" he said in a slow voice.

"You don't want to keep him, do you?"

"No! I don't like him at all."

"Kick him out."

"I don't know how."

"Ask the others."

"Okay." Morgan closed his eyes.

D.J. sat back. Business mode, she thought. Business mode. Everything has a place; how do I get rid of something that doesn't belong? Delete it on the computer. Shred the file. For a minute she visualized Chase as a paper ghost, going into the shredder whole and coming out as narrow crimped strips of paper. See him get out of that one.

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Dump the trash. Edit the bad phrases out of the report. But Morgan wasn't a computer.

What would Dr. Kabukin do?

What was she always trying to get Morgan to do? Integrate. And Clift said no; it would make them all disappear, and leave Morgan confused. What if they each grabbed a piece of Chase and wouldn't let go, though? Maybe if they pulled him to pieces, the pieces would be easier to get rid of.

Shredding.

"Morgan," said D.J.

"I'm trying to kick him out but he won't go! Even Gary can't hold him!"

"Morgan, integrate him."

"What?" He sounded panic-stricken. "I don't want him in here!"

"Each of you take a different piece."

"No! I don't want anything he has!"

"Is what you're doing working?"

"No! We keep trying to beat him up, but he's stronger. He's awful, D.J. He looks around and everything he sees is ugly and he makes us look at it like that and we can't find our own eyes. He looks at us and we're all ugly. And we get all weak when he looks at us like that! All my insiders had ugly places in their vision, but we talked about them and they got better, but he won't let us talk, he won't listen, he just hurts us and hurts us — "

"I know."

"He's going to poison us!"

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"Yes. But maybe if you all integrate him, the doses will be small enough for you to survive. Clift said integration would destroy your insiders."

"Destroy...." Morgan closed his eyes again.

After a long moment of restless silence, Morgan opened his mouth. "Dorothy Jean!" cried Chase. "Never forget. I always loved you, even after you betrayed me. I love you now even though you've betrayed me again. My lamb, my savior, my Judas — "

"Shut up!" said D.J., fighting tears and anger.

Morgan began coughing and choking. Harley climbed out of the car and opened the back door, standing back a respectful distance, but watching Morgan.

What have I done? D.J. thought. If they take the pleasure he had killing those women, if they take that he likes pain, if they find out why he did it, won't that turn them into him? Won't they do it themselves? What about little Mishka? She's too young to understand. What about Saul? What if he turns really nasty the way Chase was? What about Valerie, what if she takes that hate he had?

Morgan was coughing deep coughs that forced their way up from the bottom of his lungs. He was holding his stomach with his hand-cuffed hands, curling up.

After what seemed like a long time, when he was actually coughing up blood, he stopped, and slumped, exhausted, on the back seat.

"Now," he said in a hoarse whisper. "Now we're going to close the door,

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okay? Close the door."

"Buddy?" Harley said, stooping to stare at him.

Morgan looked at him with bloodshot eyes, wiping his mouth on his pirate sleeve.

"You need a hospital or something?"

Morgan swallowed. "Glass of water?" he managed.

Harley ran inside and came out with a big paper cup of water. He climbed in the back seat with Morgan, pushed him upright, and held the cup to his lips. D.J. hugged herself, wondering if Chase would make a move, strangle Harley with the handcuffs, push the water in his face and make a break. But Morgan sipped, coughed, sipped, sagged against the seat.

"Did you do it?" Harley asked.

"Yeah," said someone. It was hard to tell who, Morgan's voice was so strained. It sounded like it might be Gary. "You were right, Doro; couldn't take him in a fight, but when we went to — pull him inside us, the way Morgan does with ghosts, he came apart."

"Does this mean you're all — polluted by him?" she asked in a small voice.

"Ah, sugar," said Valerie, and took another sip of water. "Not like we didn't have our dark sides before."

"Are you going to kill people?" D.J. asked, her voice still high and tiny. She put her feet up on the seat and hugged her knees to her chest, her back against the passenger door.

"As the oldest, I took that part," Afra said, her voice clear. "I can own it without acting on it. Just as you could know about horrors and not become them. We have the power to say no."

"No more ghosts," Clift said.

"No more ghosts," agreed Elaine.

"You don't mind if I leave these cuffs on you for now, though, do you?" Harley asked.

"Cuffed me wrong," said Gary. "Should have done it behind my back, Buford."

"I know," said Harley.

"I don't mind," said Morgan. "Except I'd like breakfast."

"So would I," Harley said. "We've got to hang around here until the crime lab finishes, got to have our hands and guns tested — you know the routine,

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Gary—but I bet we could order something in." He went into the hotel office.

Morgan leaned forward, looking through the divider into D.J.'s eyes. She stared back, saw his eyes darken into Gary's. "Doro," he whispered. "I took the love."

"What?"

"They let me take what I could stand of him, and I took the love he had for you."

She closed her eyes. "I don't want that back."

"It's the cleanest thing he owned."

"Put it away, Gary." She stared into his eyes. "Whatever happens now, let that be just between us. All eleven of us, but — "

He took a deep breath, let it out. "All right," he said. "All right." He leaned back and relaxed against the seat. "As long as there's a future at all."

Was that possible? All the parts of Morgan she had begun to fall in love with, infected with pieces of what she most wanted to escape?

She looked at him. His eyes were closed and his breathing had slowed into sleep. She was tired of running away. She couldn't abandon him because he had followed her advice.

By the time Harley was back with food, she was thinking of ways to cover up spray-painted graffiti on apartment walls.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

SUMMER IS often a magical time for us. As children, we had the season off — long, sunny days filled with play and laughter. Even as an adult who works year round, I haven't lost that feeling of magic. I expect each warm, bright day to be a gift.

Elizabeth Hand has captured that feeling in our August cover story, "Last Summer at Mars Hill." Mars Hill, founded in 1883, is a spiritualist community "in the middle of nowhere on the rocky Maine coast." Its residents are mostly former hippies, although some of the year-round residents are much older. Even before sixteen-year-old Moony leaves for Mars Hill with her mother, she knows that her mother would never return. Moony's mother, Ariel Rising, has cancer and even though she believes she will find a cure, Moony knows her mother will die. But in between the magic of summer and the magic of belief lies a place that only a few can see, and Mars Hill is merely a doorway...

Also in August, **Jack McDevitt** returns with the story of a starship that has outlived its usefulness. The *Venture* is locked in orbit over a colonized planet. Once a tourist attraction, now a danger to life below, the *Venture* must be set free. Yet at what price? The answer lies in "Glory Days."

Rob Chilson's story provides a bridge between fantasy and science fiction, yet still retains the issue's magical feel. On another colonized planet "which only had two events in its short history," a young girl decides to look for buried treasure. Jan Conway, bored by school yet intrigued by history, wonders if pirates roamed space as they had once roamed Earth's seven seas. And if pirates roamed, they also hid treasure. Here begins an adventure that involves Jan and her teacher, Mr. Ladysmith, in something both eerie and wistful, something full of "Midnight Yearnings."

Also in August, **Gregory Benford** provides our science column, and **John Kessel** and **Charles de Lint** examine books. Future issues bring cover stories by **Ian MacLeod**, **Marcos Donnelly**, and **Mike Resnick**. We have two stories on hand by **Ray Bradbury**, and a wonderful sf tale by **Ray Aldridge**. The future also holds more **Nina Kiriki Hoffman**, **Richard Bowes**, and **Dale Bailey**. The subscription form is on page 157. Don't miss an issue.

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